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Redefining the **META** at
VRMMO Academy

story: Hayaken

illustration: Hika Akita



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Chapter 1: Chariot Hunting

And the next day...

Summer vacation was nearly halfway over, and I was itching to game all day! As I was a pretty good kid, my parents' philosophy was to allow me to dive into whatever I loved.

After eating breakfast and getting ready for the day, I logged into Unlimited World.

My spawn point was the classy cottage in the new world of Summertide, which was serving as our guild's home base. More specifically, I appeared in the middle of the deck and was treated to a lovely view of the ocean.

When I arrived, Akira was standing right in front of me.

"Yo, Akira."

"Oh! Good morning, Ren!"

Her adorable smile was the same as ever, but her ensemble gave her a totally different impression. She was wearing a swimsuit!

This might've been the first time I'd seen her in one. The sword dancer gear showed off a lot of skin, but the bikini look was even more incredible.

What a lovely sight. I was still feeling a little sleepy, but this woke me right up. Big boobs, slender hips, snow-white skin, plump softness...

"Ooh, thanks for the early-morning fanservice! Yep, today's gonna be a good day. I really appreciate you doing this just for me!"

"I-It's not just for you! I was just swimming, so... eh, whatever. I'm glad you like it. Teehee."

"I'm not so sure about that," interjected Akabane, poking her head out of the water. "I happen to recall you worrying so much about which he would like best that you hardly took more than a dip in the sea."

Oh, so Akabane's already here. I didn't even notice.

"Nozomi, stop telling people my business!"



“Yes, yes. If you need me, I’ll be swimming until we leave. I might as well enjoy it.”

Today, we were planning to continue our delve into Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. We had some beef to settle with Mr. Death Chariot. If all went well, he could be the key to dealing with the Hadean Rose that had obliterated us last time.

After Emily left yesterday, we’d tried to take one more trip into the dungeon. Despite Akira’s summoning of Akabane making us a full party, there had been a Monster House the moment we entered. We’d been mobbed by slimes and killed almost instantly.

But today, we were starting fresh.

“I’ll do that too! Come swim with me, Ren!”

“Sure! I’ll go change!”

The three of us swam around and rode on the jet ski until everyone else arrived, at which point we departed for Aswarth’s. Today’s party consisted of Akira, Maeda, Yano, Akabane, Shizuku, and me. We were basically the same party as yesterday, except Akabane had taken Emily’s place.

In terms of classes, our lineup was sword dancer, scholar, sky pirate, another sword dancer, martial artist, and symbologist. I loved having that double sword dancer composition.

As Emily was an armor knight, she had the wide-range taunt skill Provoke, which was great for big hordes of weak monsters. Her Crimson Calamity could also kill all the enemies she brought to her in one swoop. She was a valuable tank in both normal battles and in boss chambers. I didn’t care much for good classes, but it did feel safer to have one around.

How would our double sword dancer comp fare? We were just planning to mess around with Mr. Death Chariot today, so I didn’t need to think *too* much about efficiency.

While I was mulling these things over, we arrived at the entrance to Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins.

“Huh. Not many people today,” I noted.

“Yeah, really. There were way more yesterday,” Akira said.

“What’s it mean?” Yano asked. “Do these people, like... actually go out IRL?”

I shook my head. “Nah, no way. Anyone who came here for the Rainbow Guard is a real, dyed-in-the-wool gamer. I doubt they’d slack off like that. Most likely, they’re all grinding and planning to take down that Hadean Rose. Collecting items, grabbing talents, stuff like that. It’s just a temporary stop while they’re busy with all that.”

“I getcha. Slacking off of video games, though... That’s a funny thought.”

“Yes, it is rather silly,” Maeda agreed. “Even so, I suppose it makes sense.”

“Your zeal and your keeping tabs on the competition reminds me of a sports team on their way to an important match,” Shizuku commented.

“Well, professional gaming is just becoming accepted as a real occupation,” Akabane replied. “That’s what Emily and her friends are doing, no? Our corporation has been considering forming its own team.”

I let out a chuckle. “Heheheh. Just imagine how good it’ll feel to beat pro gamers to the bottom of the dungeon. Aww yeah, I’m getting fired up! Let’s win this!”

But first, we needed to see the chariot of death himself.

We plunged into the dungeon. Our destination this time was B10F, so to get there, we would warp to B6F and clear the next four floors.

I’d like to say things went well along the way, but that wasn’t quite true. Without Emily, our small-fry culling went much slower. In cases where the gate condition was to kill all enemies on the floor, she was the perfect one for the job. She could set them up by pulling them in, then knock them down with her wide-range ult.

I’ve gotta come up with a way to speed things up.

That said, not every gate required that much effort. We cleared each one somewhat slower than before as we approached our destination. Just then, we heard a familiar *ping!*

Gate Condition cleared!

Head for the gate to the next floor!

Akira cheered. “Woo! Next up is the long-awaited B10F!”

“Heck yeah. Let’s go!”

Leading the pack, she and I ran for the warp gate.

Along the way, Yano asked me, “So why are we going to this guy, anyway? Does he have something we need?”

“Of course! Remember how he gave us this armor called Blood-Dead Robe a while back? I wanna see if he’ll give us more stuff!”

“How do we get it?”

“I’ve got a theory, so that’s what we’re here to test.”

“Eww, he said ‘test’! Every time he uses that magic word, he can make us do whatever weird stuff he wants!”

“Thanks for the compliment!”

“That wasn’t a compliment!”

Still bickering, we entered the warp gate. The scenery before us was replaced with a giant, empty arena-like battlefield. Like before,

there was palpable loneliness emanating from the empty stands.

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat the boss monster!

Ping!

It has been 28 minutes since you entered. In 120 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

Two system messages in a row? Oh, crap! We're almost out of time!

Fortunately, our sword dancer duo had way more firepower in boss battles. We would take him down in seconds!

"We're out of time, so I'm going to kill him in three ults! Back me up, girls!"

Akira nodded. "Okay! I'll cover for you, Ren!"

"My AP is topped up and at your disposal," reported Nozomi.

"I gotcha, bro!" Yano flashed a thumbs-up.

"I will support you from afar with offensive magic," said Maeda.

Shizuku turned toward me. "Do you object to me attacking as I please?"

"Not at all. Punch his lights out!"

Maeda and Shizuku were free to do what they wanted at times like this. They wouldn't accidentally take aggro, so they could just hit as hard as possible without worry.

Groaning, the gate on the opposite side of the arena lifted. Soon after, I heard metallic grinding noises coming our way.

Skree-ee! Skree-ee!

The creature's upper body was covered with a black robe, and it wore a mask that looked just like a famous screaming face. Its lower body was composed of wheels with metal spikes, plus a pair of dragon heads. The beast's arms were bound with spiky chains, and it wielded a massive scythe.

This being looked like the incarnation of weird death metal, but in truth, he was a really nice guy with a heart of gold who would literally give a naked man the clothes off his back. That was the true nature of our Mr. Death Chariot.

He appeared from behind the gate and sluggishly approached.

Seeing him for the first time, Akira squealed in excitement.

"Whoa, that's the Death Chariot?! He's scary! I love this design so much!"

She then pulled out her camera and pointed it at him. No matter what, she always wanted to screenshot new things. That was our pic-snapping addict for you.

Akabane was very much the opposite. “What bizarre taste he has. I’m suddenly feeling ill.”

Hey, it’s a matter of taste. Anyway, I’d better get into striking range.

“He who strikes first wins! Final Strike! Enervating Circle!”

And as a reminder, here were the effects!

Final Strike

Cooldown: 0/300 seconds

<Effect> Greatly increases damage of next attack, but breaks weapon afterward.

Enervating Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

<Effect> Places a magic circle that decreases AGI by 25% for all enemies inside.

Symbologist only

In exchange for breaking my weapon, it would greatly boost my next attack’s damage. By creating a large circle, I also used up almost all of my MP.

“Eat my ultimate move! Vermilion Wiiiing!”

“Graaaaaargh!”

A phoenix’s flames enveloped me as I charged at the Death Chariot and sliced right through it. This ultimate was made up of Turnover, Explosive Tackle, and Quickdraw, thanks to the Skill Chain talent.

Turnover

Cooldown: 0/300 seconds

<Effect> Swaps current HP and MP.

Symbologist only

Explosive Tackle (AP: 75; HP: 10% of max)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> A high-speed tackle that envelops the user in flames. Hits an area in front of the user.

Quickdraw (AP: 0)

Hidden Weapon Art

<Effect> Lightning-fast strike that takes enemies by surprise. Hits once.
Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases.
Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

When all of these were used at once, they made up Vermilion Wing.

As Turnover swapped my current HP and MP stats, using Enervating Circle ahead of time put my HP right into the red zone. Turnover was a symbologist-only skill, so bringing down one's HP so low at will was something that only this class could do. Explosive Tackle's high-speed, flaming charge came at a cost of 10% more HP, putting me in the single digits. I was a gust of wind away from certain death.

All of this culminated in Quickdraw, an art that increased my damage more as my HP went down. Thanks to my HP being this low, it was at maximum power. By activating Final Strike just before my ultimate, I ramped up my damage even further. This all resulted in such insane damage that it was truly worthy of being called the drama cannon!

That was how Vermilion Wing worked.

My other drama cannon ultimate worked pretty similarly, using Turnover to reduce my HP to near death at will and throwing in Quickdraw to maximize my damage. Activating Final Strike along with it made for the same basic setup in either situation.

In any case, firing off an ultimate put me close to dying. There were plenty of negatives. If I took aggro, I'd die almost immediately. Quickdraw and other hidden weapon arts were only usable once per battle, so to avoid that, I'd have to craft a new weapon mid-battle. Each ultimate used up a *ton* of money.

However, my one-shot damage was far and away the best. With this min-maxed drama cannon, my goal was to improve symbologist's reputation from "worst of the worst." That was my life's work as the Emperor of the Underpowered!

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.
Dealt 5,904 damage to Death Chariot!

A log displayed the damage dealt by my ultimate.

Just as spicy as ever! It's about time to finish this reaper off!

Having taken such a huge amount of damage from the outset, the Death Chariot turned to me and began charging in to attack. After my ultimate, I was inches from death. One hit would kill me. However, I

trusted everyone else enough to hold him back, so I opened my item window to begin crafting my next Canesword.

“You’re up, girls!”

Crafting wasn’t normally possible in battle, but my Efficiency talent bypassed that limitation.

“Gotcha. Guilty Steal!”

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren’s aggro!

With that, Yano took away all of the aggro I’d built up. The Death Chariot spun around in place and rolled at her.

“Sword Samba!”

Akira and Akabane simultaneously used Sword Samba.

Akira activated Sword Samba.

Ren’s cooldowns have been fully reset!

Nozomi activated Sword Samba.

Yuuna’s cooldowns have been fully reset!

“Allow me to heal you too!”

Kotomi activated Ex-Heal.

Ren recovered 345 HP.

Maeda had come in with perfect timing as usual. I was truly grateful for these girls, especially the potent combination of two sword dancers. Last time we fought the Death Chariot, Ryuutarou had been our sword dancer; now we had the cute Akira and the beautiful Akabane in our arsenal instead. Simply incredible.

With that, my second Canesword was complete. As preparation for my ultimate, I cast circle magic and activated Final Strike.

“Off we go again! Vermilion Wing!”

“Graaaaarh!”

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.

Dealt 5,904 damage to Death Chariot!

Taking that as their signal, the girls moved again.

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren’s aggro!

Akira activated Sword Samba.

Ren's cooldowns have been fully reset!
Nozomi activated Sword Samba.
Yuuna's cooldowns have been fully reset!
Kotomi activated Ex-Heal.
Ren recovered 345 HP.

Everyone was in perfect sync! With one more shot of my ultimate, the Death Chariot would be down.

I crafted a third Canesword and performed pre-ult preparations. Next would be my ultimate, but this time, we needed a special twist. As for what that was, well, I was going to have to channel my inner Ryuutarou.

Indeed, I needed to strip!

“Equipment Set D!”

I activated the ability of my accessory, the Equip Ring.

Equip Ring

Type: Accessory

Level: 10

Effect: Allows the user to change equipment quickly through verbal commands.

[Same effect as the talent Quick Change]

There were a lot of accessories out there with talent effects, essentially freeing up a talent slot by using an accessory slot instead. This gear change made it so that my equipment was as follows:

Main Weapon: Canesword (OEX)

Subweapon: None

Ranged Weapon: Blowgun (OEX)

Ammunition: Sleep Darts

Head: None

Body: Damascus Robes

Arms: None

Legs: None

Feet: None

Accessory 1: Equip Ring

Accessory 2: Rush Ring

My head, arms, legs, and feet were all bare!

We had received the Blood-Dead Robe from this Death Chariot last time we came, but we hadn't heard of anyone receiving other kinds of gear. I'd asked a handful of people, including the item-loving Homura and our info-brokering Kataoka, but no one knew anything

about it.

The question, then, was what had made our party different from the others. The answer? Well, Ryuutarou, of course. This boss had used a skill called Dark Possession to force the Blood-Dead Robe into one of his equipment slots.

And what made Ryuutarou special? The fact that he was naked, obviously.

My expectation was that, when the Death Chariot was defeated, it activated Dark Possession if anyone was naked at the time. Who would fight a boss naked, after all? The Death Chariot didn't use any skills that forcefully *removed* equipment either.

To sum all this up, Ryuutarou was the only idiot who would be nude upon the defeat of Death Chariot. We had been lucky enough to witness this hidden mechanic on our first run! No wonder nobody else knew about the Blood-Dead Robe.

First off, I wanted to test my hypothesis to see if it was correct. After that, as I had mentioned to Yano, I wanted to know if he would drop other equipment.

With my change of clothes, only my upper body was covered by Damascus Robes. If everything but my upper body was bare, maybe he would give me a different piece of armor.

When it came to the Blood-Dead Robe's stats, they were... problematic.

Blood-Dead Robe

Type: Armor

Level: 50

DEF: 77

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

As defensive equipment, it was beyond useless. However, according to my testing, wearing the Blood-Dead Robe made my Elemental Circle spell much more likely to dredge up dark-type magic.

If there were other pieces of equipment, they ought to come with dark-boosting capabilities as well. And if that was true, then how could I not want them?!

"Here I come, Death Chariot! It's the final Vermilion Wiiiing!" I called out, before releasing the killing ultimate!

Covered in phoenix flames, my charging slash whizzed through the Death Chariot, rending him in twain!

"Gaaaaaarh!"

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.
Dealt 5,904 damage to Death Chariot!
Ren has defeated Death Chariot.

Woo! Killed him with three consecutive ultimates!

Apart from the three Caneswords I'd lost thanks to Final Strike, we had made it through without any losses. It was a trade-off of money and big damage, after all. The real world was a tough place!

"Graaarh... Raaaaaargh!"

The chariot writhed and screamed, falling to the ground. As I watched him crumple, I did my best to cheer him on from afar.

"You can't go yet! Don't give up! I need the thing, man! The thing! Please, please, pleeeeeease!"

Death Chariot prepared to activate Dark Possession.

"YEEEEEEAH!"

As my joyful shout echoed through the arena, the Death Chariot's body turned into a small, black light. It flew my way and gently enveloped my body. Then, the black light filled my eyes.

Once it faded, something was obscuring my field of vision.

Did he give me a mask? I feel like that's the most likely explanation.

Akira pointed at me and burst out laughing. "Ahahaha! Ren, you should see your face! It looks good on you!"

"If you wanted armor that wasn't upper-body armor, I suppose he did give you what you wanted," Akabane murmured.

Maeda was also trying to stifle a giggle. "But... Pfft, it does look silly!"

"Lookin' good, Takashiro!" Yano said.

Shizuku was much more blunt. "It's frankly ugly as sin, but it's good that you got what you wanted."

"Wait, Ren, don't take it off yet! I gotta snap a pic!"

While Akira took screenshots galore, it was clear that the reason my vision was obstructed was because he'd put a mask on me. The mask was long and white, straight out of a well-known horror flick.

Yell Mask

Type: Helmet

Level: 50

DEF: 27

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

Yell Mask, huh? It's just as bad as the Blood-Dead Robe!

It murdered your stats, and it slowed you down. Both in battle and mobility, it was hard to see any value in this. All in all, it looked like nothing more than a piece of garbage.

Still, I imagined it would have the same dark-boosting hidden effect as the Blood-Dead Robe. That would require some testing later.

Either way, my hypothesis was correct, and we'd gotten a new piece of equipment! As long as I managed my equipment when I dealt the finishing blow to the Death Chariot, we could get all the other gear. What remained were the arms, legs, and feet!

Gotta collect 'em all!

"On to the next one, girls! We have three more to go."

I believed that the Blood-Dead Robe increased dark circle probability to about twenty percent. With five of them, it stood to reason that we would reach one hundred percent dark circles! My dream was coming true at last!

A few hours later, I emerged from Aswarth's Undersea Ruins wearing the following:

Head: Yell Mask

Body: Blood-Dead Robe

Arms: Gauntlets of the Deceased

Legs: Pants of the Raging Wheels

Feet: Fool Dragons' Boots

By the way, here's a quick wrap-up:

Gauntlets of the Deceased

Type: Gloves

Level: 50

DEF: 22

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

Pants of the Raging Wheels

Type: Bottoms

Level: 50

DEF: 32

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

Fool Dragons' Boots

Type: Shoes

Level: 50

DEF: 22

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: All stats -100, movement speed down.

Yep, they were all terrible. Nevertheless, I was thrilled to be in the Death Chariot gear. Why, I looked to be the Death Chariot himself! It was as if he'd decided he wanted to be human and shrunk down to size. The only real difference was that I walked on legs instead of wheels.

Now that I had all of his gear, I could see how he worked—specifically, what was going on under the robe!

From top to bottom, we started with the Yell Mask. As explained before, it was a silly mask based on a movie.

Next, the Blood-Dead Robe. It was pretty creepy with its bloodstains and ghastly visual effects, but apart from that, a normal robe.

After that, the Gauntlets of the Deceased. Left and right were bound together with chains; aside from the fact that I couldn't move, though, they were pretty normal.

The Pants of the Raging Wheels had a ridiculous design, with wheels all over the sides of the legs. When I stood up, the lowest wheels dragged against the ground.

Finally, the Fool Dragons' Boots. They had a lopsided design where the fronts were really long. The top of the front of either boot had plesiosaur-like dragons attached to them.

"So does this make me the Death Chariot now?"

I tried sitting seiza style, on my knees. Just as I did, the wheels lined up like a tank, and the dragons attached to my boots seemed to leap out. He must have sat like this under his robe.

Just as my knees touched the ground, the wheels started to turn with a hideous creak, and the dragon heads came poking out!

"Kshaaaaah!"

"Whoa, sick! This gear actually moves!"

This amazing set let me move just like the real thing!

It felt kind of like riding a Legway. When I leaned one way, the wheels would move and turn in that direction. There were no handlebars, and I wasn't sure how to stop.

"Wow, that's cool!" Akira marveled. "Does it just do what you want? It kinda looks fun!"

"Yeah, it does it all on its own! I could get into this!"

I spun the wheels while I circled the girls, surveying the area. The

sensation was kind of like sitting seiza-style on a dolly while someone pushed me around. Sitting like this was going to get tiring, but it was really fun how it moved automatically.

"I wanna try! Let me borrow them after," Akira said.

"Sure! We can all take turns!"

"Does that mean we're done with Aswarth's runs for the day? If so, we should try to ride this all the way back to the cottage!"

"Maybe so. Heck, some people might want it for cosplay. This could be a nice advertisement for our guild shop!"

Now I could astonish those mere pedestrians! Nobody else in the game would have full Death Chariot gear like me. Without an idiot in your party who would go to a boss battle naked, you'd never know how to get this stuff.

Thanks, Ryuutarou! But never come back to my party again!

"Ooh, yeah. If it sells for a lot, we could mass-produce them and make a fortune!" Akira's eyes glimmered with greed.

If we could fundraise with this, then taking a few extra sets back home would be nice. Fundraising was always important.

"I think I'll pass. The thing looks grody as heck. Akki, you can leave me out."

"Erm, I have to agree."

"I'll also have to refuse. I will follow you... from a distance. It's embarrassing to be seen with that ensemble."

Yano, Maeda, and Akabane did not seem as impressed.

Shizuku, on the other hand, was down with it. "Hmm. Perhaps *I* will wear it. It could make for an amusing memory."

Akira, Shizuku, and I decided to take turns with it as we marched our way back to the cottage.

"Well, then it's settled. First, though, I need to test the most important thing!" I proclaimed.

"Oh, yeah, your circle thing? Having five pieces of equipment should make it guaranteed, right?" Akira asked.

"Exactly. It won't take long at all, so gimme just a sec to try it out."

"Go right ahead! We'll watch."

"Awesome! Elemental Cir— Hey, what the heck? Elemental Circle! Aaargh, it interrupted me! It's really hard to stop!"

To cast magic, I needed to be stationary. But as this outfit moved on its own, it was tough to stay still. I would try to cast magic, get interrupted, try again, and get interrupted again. What was I, an NPC with busted AI?

"Whatcha doing, Ren? Is this testing too?" Akira looked at me blankly.

Dang it! If you're always doing weird stuff, people don't notice when

you're actually making mistakes! This is one of those times!

"Nah. I just can't stay in one place, so it interrupts my magic."

"Oh, you were actually having trouble. Okay, I'll help you stay still!"

Akira circled behind me and grabbed my shoulders, but the wheels kept moving, driving me forward.

"Hm? Still rolling? Okay, I'll put my back into it. Hah!"

Akira squeezed me tight, holding me in place. Finally, the wheels stopped.

Aah, boobs on my back! This is lovely.

The sensation made me just want to freeze up for a while. I've said this a few times, but this game was realistic in some weird places. It was enough to make me want to say, "Yeah, girl, keep going."

"Uh, Ren? You can go ahead and cast your magic. You're not having weird thoughts, are you?"

Shizuku cleared her throat. "Ahem! Virtual or not, remember that you are on school grounds. I understand it's summer vacation, but students must still follow the moral code. If you have nothing important to do, then keep a wholesome distance."

She was a lot more teacherly than Ms. Nakada. The latter would've just ignored that outright. Her tone of voice was strangely authoritative too. Were all big shots like this? Shizuku just made you want to give up and obey, lest you face the consequences.

"Oh, sorry. We'll hurry! Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle, Elemental Circle!"

Watching the colors of my circles, Draco reported, "Chichirp! Black, black, black, black, black!"

YESSSSS!

"Awesome! Just as I expected! I have the one hundred percent dark circles I've been dreaming of!"

I tried to raise my hands in exultation, but the chains on the Gauntlets of the Deceased did not allow me to do so.

Man, these things are annoying!

"Gaaah, I can't move with this on! Let's just ride home already!"

"Sure! I'll take plenty of screenshots of all the people spooked by the sudden Death Chariot appearance!"

"As you wish. Full speed ahead!"

I flung my body forward in an attempt to go fast.

"Graaaaaarh!"

The creaky wheels and snarling dragons moved energetically, but they weren't nearly as fast as they looked. In fact, they were slow as heck. My maximum speed was maybe that of a relaxed stroll. This

might've been even slower than a power wheelchair.

I didn't feel like a Death Chariot at all—at best I felt like a Death Carriage! A chariot was supposed to go super fast and blast away everyone in its path. Like a tank, but instead of shooting things, it just slammed into things.

“Ngh! It's so slow.”

“That's one word for it,” Akira said dryly.

“Well, all the parts *do* reduce movement speed, I guess.”

Maybe they didn't want people going too fast? What a shame. If you could go as fast as the real Death Chariot, people might collect a whole bunch and run races with them.

I would've loved to take screenshots of people riding Death Chariots around like in *Mareo Kar*, but this was just too slow.

“I might as well walk at this point.”

I stood up and tried to walk normally, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't move.

“Ugh! What in the world?!”

My fastest walk was like watching a video at 0.25x speed. This stuff was just too hard to move in!

“I get it. It still has the movement speed reduction!”

Compared to walking in this gear, Death Chariot mode was still much faster. Whoever piloted the Death Chariot was taking a huge hit to both stats *and* speed. Imagine how strong he would be if he went into battle with real gear on?

“Do you have to wheel yourself around, then?”

“Looks like it. Let's go home... uh, slowly!”

With that, I started my engine again. We'd already used our five runs at Aswarth's for the day, so it didn't really matter if we took it slow. As we made our way down the central—and busiest—road of the island, my wheels groaned and squeaked relentlessly.

It attracted a lot of attention, pointing, and “What in the world?” from nearby players. No surprise there, as it really was an eye-catching design.

I'd be glad to sell it to anyone for a good price! We can always get more. I could teach people where to get it, but then I'd have to charge.

“Ahaha. You're so popular, Ren.”

“Yeah. This'll be great advertising for the guild shop. I like this.”

Akabane heaved a sigh behind us. “Haah. I don't mind this sort of attention when I'm with my brother, at least.”

Poor girl's been through a lot.

“Well, it is thanks to him that we found this. I'm at least grateful for that, if nothing else.”

I turned to Akabane and gave her a thumbs-up. Right now, though, I looked like a miniature Death Chariot. No doubt it was a

bizarre sight to see the chariot making human gestures.

“Thank you. But would you mind not talking to me when you’re wearing that? I don’t want people thinking we’re friends.” Her voice was laced with disgust.

Just then, Yukino happened to pass by us.

“Hey, Akira! And is that... Ren?” She cringed. “What in the world are you wearing?!”

Was she about to go to Aswarth’s?

Akira gave her a big smile. “Yukino, hi!”

“Yo, Yukino, what’s up? You oughta know what I’m wearing.”

“Hmm. Is that from one of the bosses in Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins?”

“Correct! It’s from the Death Chariot. This makes you really *feel* like him.”

“I’ve never seen that gear before. Can you use it for PvP?”

That *would* be the first question asked by our resident PvP lover. I wasn’t even sure her thoughts went beyond that.

“Nope, it’s useless. It comes with so many crappy effects. Wanna see?”

“Huh? Yeah, why not.”

I opened up the item window and showed it to Yukino, who grimaced.

“What the heck? It’s just cosplay garbage! No, thanks!”

“It is rare, though. I think I’m the first person to have it all. Hey, speaking of, is Homura around today?”

“Nah, but she’ll be— Whoops, there she is now.”

“Uh, Yukino, what are you doing?! What’s that *thing* next to you?!”

“Heyo, Homura!”

There’s our item fetishist! Surely she’ll have some interest in this gear.

Having all the items in the game was her big dream, after all. Whether it was great or crappy, if she didn’t have it, she needed it. That was the item fetishist’s nature.

Maybe she’ll be willing to buy this info for a good price?

“Takashiro?! What are you wearing?! I’ve never seen that before! It kinda looks like that one boss in Aswarth’s.”

“You got it. Death Chariot’s the name. We got this gear from him, and I think we might still be the only ones.”

“Hmm, yes. This is the first I’ve heard of anyone getting it. Death Chariot is a boss from the lower floors, right? I wonder why it’s so rare if so many people have been through there.”

“Yep. I’d say supply’s low enough to drive the price up pretty high. Interested?”

“You’d sell it to me?!”

Homura leaned in excitedly. As the item-lovers' guild leader, she was a sucker for new stuff. Yukino just looked at her in annoyance.

"Do you really want that? Just so you know, it's complete garbage. Worse than wearing nothing."

"Hmph. An item's value isn't in stats alone! You're too narrow-minded."

"Say what?! You oughta be ashamed. Good or bad, you just wanna get your grubby little hands on whatever items you can find."

"I don't want to hear that from you, meat-for-brains!"

"Silence, item freak!"

They then began their usual stare-off. The sisters were supposed to be on the same team this time, but it looked like their partnership would fall apart at any moment. As usual, their policies just didn't mesh despite the fact that they were enjoying the same game.

"Well, based on my testing, this gear has a hidden effect."

Now Yukino seemed a little curious. "That so? What is it?"

"When a symbologist equips it, it increases the likelihood of Elemental Circle pulling dark. Each piece of gear raises it by about twenty percent."

"I think I know that one. It adds extra attacks to each normal attack or something, right? It's just random which one it does."

"Yep. How'd you know?"

Yukino seemed to know everything when it came to fighting.

"I make it a point to learn about anything that might affect PvP balance, so I had our guild's testing wing check it out for me. Each time the effect goes off, it uses the attacker's MP, yeah?"

"That's right."

"If you don't use it carefully, it can actually get in the way of your party members."

Yukino wasn't wrong. Each attack used up MP. In terms of other popular RPGs, one might liken it to the Somatic Staff. I'd hate to have someone cast it on me without my permission; my MP was mine to spend as I liked!

Light-elemental circles had an MP-absorption effect, so people might be fine with having it forced on them if it was a guarantee. Unfortunately, the Death Chariot gear only gave us the HP-absorbing dark circles.

"I get it, though. The developers probably just meant to make it easier to farm solo, anyway."

"Yeah. Sucks for you, huh?"

"Nah, I don't mind. The dark circle seems promising. It's still got plenty of room for experimentation!"

"That so? Heh, I'm always excited for ya to show me something crazy and new."

“Forget all that,” Homura cut in with a huff. “We were in the middle of a deal! Are you gonna sell it to me or not?”

“Hmm... I could trade you one piece for a Peregrine Stone, maybe?”

As you might recall, Homura had once given me a Peregrine Stone. This material allowed weapons to attack twice. Using it to launch a destructive Dead End V made for such a fond memory. An *expensive* memory, at that.

Ever since then, I’d never used a Peregrine Stone to make an item myself. But this time, we would probably need one. I just lacked the one thing necessary to acquire it: cold, hard cash. At times like this, I had to rely on our rich girl Homura’s wallet!

If this had been any normal competition for the Rainbow Guard, I would’ve gladly given her this stuff for free just because she’d been so nice to us. But for Akira to really enjoy this game from now on, we had to do something about the sword dancer gear. I was the one who’d pushed it on her, after all. If her parents got mad and pulled her out of school, it would be all my fault.

This time, we had to compete seriously. However, a tight focus on victory didn’t mean I could forget about redefining the meta and killing those giants!

Taking all that into consideration, I’d charged Homura a ridiculous price. While having a Peregrine Stone would be cool and all, I didn’t want our bigger plans to hit a roadblock just to get one. Hagglng was a must.

“So, five stones for all of it, then? You’re overcharging me here, but this is advance access to something that nobody else has.”

Homura mulled it over. It was pretty darn expensive for a mere collector’s item, after all. So, I changed my proposal, and I was serious this time. By proposing a ridiculous price off the bat, I had warmed her up to what I really wanted.

“Okay, how about I tell you how to get it? The information fee can just be one stone. Once you know how to get it, it won’t take you long at all.”

More like you’d never get it unless you know how. For us, it had been a lucky break. *Thanks, Ryuutarou.*

Either way, this was the option I wanted her to choose. It would also keep us from having to grab more. With Homura’s team wasting their time to get the gear, that would slow down their progress in the meantime. In a way, this was sort of an interference tactic.

“Okay, that works for me. Here’s your Peregrine Stone.”

Homura handed over the stone like it was nothing. She really was rich. I had to wonder how many more she had.

“Thanks for your business!”

We ought to be one step closer to taking down that Hadean Rose now!

I told Homura how to get the Death Chariot gear, which prompted an indignant yelp.

“Ew, that’s how you do it?! How did you even find that out?!”

“It was all luck, trust me. We had a certain nudist with us.”

“Huh?! That’s so weird! I guess being nude in order to receive it does make sense. Still... ew.”

“Yep. Again, I swear it was just luck.”

“Hmph. If that’s what it takes to get a new item, then I will do what I must! Let’s go, Yukino! We need to grab that gear!”

“Are you stupid, or did you forget what we’re here for? We came to get Special Warp Stones to go fight that Hadean Rose, remember?”

“Then it doesn’t matter which floor we go to, right?! It’s random what floor the Special Warp Stones drop on, and we can get Death Chariot gear while we’re at it!”

“Heh. Did you girls also lose to the Hadean Rose?”

“You too, huh? That thing’s tough, for sure. Whichever party beats it down first is closest to that Rainbow Guard. It’s just *that* much tougher than all the other bosses. We’re still in the middle of trial and error.”

“Same here. It sounds like our progress is about equal, then.”

“Yep. Betcha most people are stuck there. Everyone’s putting together a strategy, so almost nobody’s actually there right now.”

“Hmm. If you two are coming to Aswarth’s, there must be something besides the Special stones that you want, right?”

“Heheh, yeah, you got us. We still have stuff we wanna test. What about you, Ren? I’m sure you’ll find some crazy way to win using that gear.”

“Hahaha! Well, let’s both do our best.”

“Yeah.” Yukino turned toward the rest of my crew. “Good luck to you too, girls!”

“Quit dragging your feet, Yukino!” Homura whined. “New items are waiting for me!”

“Ah, shut up. You’re making a fool of yourself.”

The sisters started fighting again as they headed for the entrance of Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. I figured now was the time to finally return to the cottage.

“Hey, Ren! Let me ride next!”

“Sure! Let’s switch.”

I handed the gear over to Akira. She gleefully equipped it and started spinning her wheels. It was far too slow for how much noise it made.

“Ahahaha! It’s so flashy, but it’s slower than walking!”

When Akira put it on, it was maybe a little too surreal. You’d

never expect something that looked like *that* to sound like a cute girl.

Nevertheless, we continued to switch places—letting Shizuku in on the fun too, of course—as we made our way back home.

After a quick breather, Akira asked, “So, it gave you a guaranteed dark circle like you wanted, right? What do we do now?”

“You should know the answer to that one.”

“Testing?”

“Certainly testing.”

“Gotta be testing.”

My guildmates all replied at once. How lovely it was that we had come to a mutual understanding!

“You are correct! After lunch, I’ll do a little bit of testing. Girls, you’re free to do as you please.”

“Sick! I think I’ll log out and take a nice little walk.”

“I think I’ll work on my homework. Don’t forget to do yours, Takashiro and Yuuna. You never know when they might approach you with relevant questions.”

“It’s scary because it’s true!”

“Hey, I’ll be fine as long as I have Kotomi with me!”

“Not if they pick you to answer the question,” Maeda chided her.

“Who cares about real homework when we’ve got in-game homework?” I scoffed. “I’m not about to lose this Hadean Rose race.”

“Of course. If you need any help, let us know.”

“I also have things to attend to, so I’ll be taking my leave as well,” said Akabane.

“Shall we resume tomorrow, then? I’ll stop by around the same time.”

“Sure. Thank you, Shizuku.”

“Oh, I’ll help you out with your testing!” Akira piped up. “Wanna meet up after lunch?”

“Sure, thanks! I’ll go scarf down my lunch now.”

“Me too!”

With that, we went our separate ways.

One hour later, after a lovely lunch courtesy of my mother, I logged in again. She had cooked up a delicious batch of fried rice. I found myself wondering what Akira ate at this time of day.

Surely she wouldn’t be eating a commoner’s meal like me. She has a personal chef at home, after all. Whatever it was, I bet it was fantastic.

You wouldn’t think so from looking at her, but she was a member of a long-standing, distinguished family.

“Aaand I’m back! Huh, no Akira yet?”

Nobody else was in the cottage, so when Draco saw me, he happily flew over.

“Hey, Draco! Let’s go test Elemental Circle for a while.”

“Chirp, chirp!”

While I waited for Akira, I cast Elemental Circle over and over while wearing the Death Chariot gear. Indeed, the dark circle came out every time. There was no mistaking it now: this was godly gear!

By the time I had let loose a hundred Elemental Circles, Akira returned to the floating cottage.

“Here I am! Sorry I’m late.”

“No prob. Let’s get going!”

“Okay, but where to? Are we starting with basic Island Bunnies again?”

“Well, we don’t *have* to. But sure, why not?”

Starting with weaklings and moving up to stronger enemies might help us come up with a new discovery. Besides, you know how they say home is where the heart is? Island Bunnies were my home.

Gotta go back to the mother country once in a while, y’know?

I hadn’t shown my face there lately, so I imagined my good friends were feeling a little lonely.

Thus, we left Summertide for the normal school grounds, then headed to the first floor of Trinisty Isle. As usual, my bunny friends were just hopping around without a care in the world.

“Aaah, this place never changes. It’s kinda relaxing, like I’ve finally come home!”

I quickly tossed a pebble at one of the Island Bunnies. They were all buddies; as soon as one was attacked, they would mob you all at once. It was like gathering them all into a big meeting.

“Yep. When you think about it, it’s kinda rude how you come home and immediately start throwing rocks at your friends.”

“More than rude. IRL, I’d be arrested,” I responded cheerfully.

I changed into the Death Chariot gear and cast an Elemental Circle at wide range to bring my MP down nice and low. That was my usual preparation for an ultimate.

“Ultimate move: Vermilion Wing!”

“Bwee! Bwee! Bwee! Bwee!”

Enveloped in my ult, my bunny friends all died together.

Well done as always, my boys!

Incidentally, my damage had settled down to just over a thousand because I hadn’t used Final Strike in advance. We weren’t here to look at big numbers today, so there wasn’t much point in breaking my weapons. Instead, we were here to watch the extra effects that came about when I used my ultimate.

Ren recovered 60 HP.

Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.

There we go!

For each one caught in the blast, I recovered HP. It was all going according to plan.

“Your damage is lower without Final Strike, but it doesn’t seem all that different. You healed for each one you hit, right?”

“Yep. But this lineup is pretty much the default, so no surprise there.”

“Do you have something to test?”

“I do. Let’s see here...”

I opened my system window and went to the editing menu for Skill Chain. Here, I could put together three skills or arts to make one ultimate move. Right now, Vermilion Wing was made up of Turnover, Explosive Tackle, and Quickdraw in that order.

“Now I’ll give this one a try,” I said, switching things around. The new order was Explosive Tackle, Turnover, and then Quickdraw.

“That oughta do it!”

“Huh? Does that make a difference?! Mine end up the same no matter what I change.”

“I have a feeling there are certain things that will make it change.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Well, when I first made Vermilion Wing, changing the order decreased my damage. I think when you activate Explosive Tackle before Turnover can switch your HP and MP, it uses your full HP in the damage calculation for Explosive Tackle.”

Explosive Tackle itself didn’t include any “increases damage at lower HP” effects, but because Quickdraw’s ability was included in the ultimate move, it affected Explosive Tackle despite coming later in the combo. Skill Chain’s logic was truly obscure and complicated. It was definitely something I wanted to test more.

Did Explosive Tackle consume HP? Today, I’d work out the answer.

“Okay, let’s do another! Ultimate move: Vermilion Wing!”

“Bwee! Bwee! Bwee! Bwee!”

Ren recovered 60 HP.

Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren's maximum HP increased by 33.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren's maximum HP increased by 60.
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren's maximum HP increased by 60.

Hey, it changed a little!

Taking a look at the effect logs, Akira said, "Wow, it's different! It didn't just absorb HP—it also increased your max HP!"

"Yeah. It does that when you absorb HP while you're at full."

Although the dark circle could give you enough HP to double your max, it only lasted three minutes. Also, the extra effect only gave you 60 HP at a time. My maximum HP was already over 2,500, so unless I could activate the extra effect more than forty times, I wouldn't be able to double it.

With a time limit of only three minutes, it would be difficult to make it that far unless I caught more enemies in the blast.

"Aah, I see. Since it's increasing your HP, that means it works by doing Turnover *after* Explosive Tackle, right?"

"Correct."

"So why did it only absorb HP the first time instead of increasing your maximum?"

"That's because Explosive Tackle uses HP to activate. Until it makes up for that gap, it's just normal HP absorption."

"Oooh, that makes sense. Kind of a shame, isn't it?"

"Well, it's not too bad. If I can get more enemies in the blast, it won't be much of a problem."

"Is that gonna be useful for the big battle strategy?"

"Yeah, I think so. It's not quite perfect yet, but at the very least, I think we're going in the right direction."

"Okay. Does that mean we're done testing here? Where are we going next?"

"Well, it's more a question of what we're *doing* next. There's one more thing I need first."

"Ooh, then we don't have anything to do! Hey, let's go sightseeing! Sightseeing, woo!"

Akira's eyes were glittering with excitement. *Was that her goal all along?!*

To be fair, her love for sightseeing was equal to my love for testing. We naturally played off each other. Sadly, I couldn't indulge

her this time.

“Nah, not today.”

“Aww, why not? C’mon, I helped you out!” Akira frowned and puffed out her cheeks.

“The thing is, if we don’t make a plan soon, someone might beat us to the Rainbow Guard. We can’t play around too much. It’d be different if the only thing we could do was wait, but right now, we can’t squander our opportunity to swoop in and win.”

We were out for blood this time, so we needed to take the optimal path to victory!

“D’aww. Is this all for me?”

“Of course. I don’t want you getting taken out of school, Akira. You’re the one who invited me to come game with you, so I’m not letting you drop out without me!”

“Ahaha! Okay, true. It’d be weird after I made you come here.”

“Besides...”

“Hm?”

“Err, I think I kinda made you feel bad with the whole Emily thing. So, uh, in order to win back your trust, I’m prepared to beat this dungeon and hand the Rainbow Guard over to you!”

“What?!” Akira blurted, looking shocked.

“Huh? Did I say something weird?”

I turned it back on her, prompting a sweet smile.

“No, that just surprised me. Thanks for thinking about me, Ren! I appreciate it. If that’s how you feel, maybe I’ll let you work to get that trust back. Now, if we wanna search for hints, how about we head to Homura’s museum?”

“Great idea. Maybe there’s an item there that’ll suit our needs.”

“They’ve got way more items than any shop, right?”

“For sure. They’re a real help when we’re in trouble—though from their point of view, I imagine they’re just happy to show off their crazy collection.”

“Haha. I don’t think they’d want to hear that from the guy who’s just as crazy about using lame classes to beat the big guys.”

“I have no rebuttal! You are correct, my dear!”

That was why I understood the item fetishists and the PvP lovers so well. It was only right for everyone to have their own way of enjoying games. I had the utmost respect for Homura and Yukino, even if I couldn’t understand Kataoka’s Hime-chan obsession or Ryuutarou’s exhibitionism!

“So, what kind of item should we look for?”

“Good question. Something that greatly increases maximum HP would help a lot because that would make my ultimate stronger too. Alternatively, we can look for something that’d make my dark circles

more effective. And no matter what, you can never have enough firepower.”

“Do you think items that power up dark-type stuff in general would help? I bet they’ll have stuff like that.”

“Yeah! We won’t know unless we take it and test it.”

“Should we ask Homura if we can take things out for some batting practice?”

“I’m not so sure... I did just kinda shake her down for that Peregrine Stone.”

“Oho, so you were planning to get that information fee from her all along? I guess you’ve gotta do whatever it takes to win.”

“Well, normally, I would’ve told her for free.”

“Gotcha. If we find anything good, I’ll ask her myself. Anyway, let’s get going!”

Thus, Akira and I set out for Homura’s Item Museum.

Chapter 2: Girl Talk

I logged out late that night after a grueling day of testing with Ren. Not a moment later, however, Nozomi sent me a message asking me to log in again. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have been able to, but the game was open twenty-four seven during summer vacation.

It was still a weird time to be up, though, so nobody else was in our cottage; this rendezvous was a secret talk between the two of us.

"And then you went to the Item Museum? Nothing particular happened in regards to your strategy or your romantic relationship?"

"Umm... I guess not? Ahahaha."

Ren and I had looked around the Item Museum for a while in hopes of finding something that would help us craft a strategy for the Hadean Rose, the big wall that was keeping everyone from finishing Aswarth's Undersea Ruins, but nothing had particularly jumped out at us.

More specifically, Ren had found a few items that he wanted to try, but there was always an issue—the required levels for the items were way higher than ours, they were only usable by classes other than symbologist, and so on. We didn't have time to powergrind at the moment, so we'd been forced to forget about the high-level options.

In the end, our investigation had been fruitless.

"Argh! I did so much work to make sure you were all alone too! How could you possibly make zero progress at all? You could have told him how you felt, or asked him how he felt about you, or anything!"

"Well, um, it's not like there was *no* progress. Ren was considerate about all the stuff with Emily; he said he didn't want to make me feel bad about it. Turns out he actually thinks about me a lot more than I realized. That was enough to satisfy me, I think. Should I really ask for any more than that?"

"Goodness, you're difficult. That may be enough for you for now, yes. But do you think you'll be able to keep yourself together if someone like Emily comes along again? What if you fall into the darkness again?"

"Uh, 'the darkness'...? I don't think I was *that* bad."

"You were. Just the other day, you looked like you had seen the end of the world. Though when you returned and found that Emily was married, you acted as though nothing had ever happened."

All I could do was laugh awkwardly in response.

I had been attending a bunch of dumb parties and ceremonies in real life due to some family stuff at the start of summer vacation. All that time, Nozomi was with me.

The Aoyagi and Akabane families were antagonistic toward each other; you could probably call us neck-and-neck rivals. When one family showed up somewhere, the other was sure to do the same.

Nozomi and I had been mutually hostile when we first came to this school. We had always hated each other, but after we cleared things up, that was no more. It felt more like I had a friend with me now. Her presence was reassuring. Even going to those high-society parties had become a teensy bit more bearable.

Recently, however, I'd started to feel like I was making more trouble than I had any right to.

"Akira, I enjoy seeing you and Takashiro get along. That has been true ever since I hid my identity when we played *Eternal Fantasy*. Your relationship has been an important part of my fun playing these games."

Before we enrolled in this school and started playing *Unlimited World*, Ren and I had often played a game called *Eternal Fantasy* together. I didn't learn this until after we started UW, but Nozomi was a mutual friend of ours in EF. Her player name was Scarlet. It had come as a huge shock, but I figured that was why we'd become such good friends in real life too.

"The same is true here in *Unlimited World*. Likewise, I hope your relationship continues for years to come. However, I know that small things can lead to friendships collapsing. As such, you must put your relationship with Takashiro into certain terms so that it cannot be so easily swayed. In short, you *must* start going out."

"B-But what about my family? They're more strict than yours, so it's not gonna be easy. It won't just be 'going out' to them; they're gonna assume we plan to get married."

"There's no use worrying about what you have no control over. At the heart of it, your feelings are directly linked to love, and you won't feel better until Takashiro is yours. Without that peace of mind, you can't enjoy the game. I believe the majority of your enjoyment is dependent on Takashiro himself."

"Urk... You're not wrong. I thought I understood myself better than that."

I slouched in disappointment. *I guess sometimes you don't know until the going gets tough.*

Nozomi clapped a hand on my shoulder and said, "Now, you have no need to worry. Anyone who sees you and Takashiro would assume you're in a relationship. All that remains is for you to mutually make

it formal. Simple, is it not?"

"You can call it simple, but it's really not! I'm totally fine with going out, but what if Ren isn't? And I still have to deal with my family!"

"Do not forget that Emily appeared and brought you to your knees while you were busy hesitating."

"I knoooow, but—"

"Next time someone like her appears, you can't count on her being married already. Then it'll be too late to regret your inaction. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I do. But still, like I said, there are a bunch of other problems."

"Ugh, you're far too indecisive. You're so unlike yourself when it comes to this."

"Wh-What am I supposed to do? Just thinking about the what-ifs scares me. Maybe Ren can't stand annoying environments like my family. If only he would ask me out himself, I'd be happy to say yes."

"Goodness! You're the one who wants to go steady, yet you plan to make him do the work? That's just irresponsible! What difference does it make if you don't ask?"

"C'mon. Don't you think that the guy is kinda supposed to initiate when it comes to this stuff?"

"Times are changing; we are meant to be equals to men. Neither side should feel pressured to initiate."

"B-But..."

"How many 'buts' do you have? As far as I can see, you need to buck up, tell Takashiro how you feel, and start going out. Why can't you just do that?"

"I'm telling you, it's not that simple! You can say that from where you stand, but just wait until you like someone. I bet it won't be that easy for you."

"What you mean to say is that because I have no such experience, I am not in a position to judge. Those who haven't experienced this firsthand have no place to speak. Is that correct?"

"Erm, I wouldn't go that far."

"If that's the case, then you needn't worry."

Nozomi sounded awfully confident.

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"You're saying that I wouldn't know and have no place to speak, right? Well, I'll have you know that I *do* have a special someone."

I couldn't believe it. "HUH?! Why didn't I hear about this?!"

"It's the first time I've said it."

"No way. I didn't think you, of all people..."

"That's quite the rude assumption to make."

“B-But Nozomi, I didn’t think you’d be that smooth! Besides, it didn’t seem like you were interested in boys at all.”

I thought I was the mature one in this situation! When did she get ahead of me?! And wait, how shocked would Kataoka be if he heard about this?

Actually, I dunno. Kataoka is pretty weird, so maybe he wouldn’t care that much. Y’know, Ren did tell me he said something about it “not mattering” if his Hime-chan was actually a guy in real life and that he would still support them with all his heart, or something like that.

“As I watched you and Takashiro, I realized that perhaps I would benefit from having a beau of my own. And indeed, I did. Every day brings new and worthwhile challenges. It’s as if life is more enjoyable than before.”

She flashed an oddly mature smile. It was like she was saying she’d seen things that I hadn’t!

Come to think of it, it does feel like Nozomi has been a lot gentler toward others lately. Maybe that’s because she found herself a significant other?

“I-I see. But won’t Kataoka be sad about it?”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. Not at all.”

“Really? Okay, if you say so.”

“So? Are you ready to hear me out seriously this time?”

“Yeah. Sorry for being weird.”

“I don’t mind. Now, how about we work on telling Takashiro how you feel? It may take some courage, but I think you’re sure to regret not putting in the effort. If someone else were to take him away from you, you might never recover from the shock. And if that’s the case, the only option is to take him for yourself once and for all.”



“You’re right. I’ll... I’ll do my best. But how should I do it?”

“A sudden confession. If that’s too difficult, perhaps you could try meeting him in real life? Upon doing so, it may come out naturally. You haven’t met in real life yet, have you?”

That might actually work.

“Yeah, honestly, I haven’t met him yet. That’s a really good idea.”

We had tried to meet him once before—mostly with Nozomi’s help—but it hadn’t gone well. The second time would be the charm, though! I was dying to meet Ren in real life!

“I believe our previous strategy of meeting him in secret is flawed. This time, why don’t you invite him to your house? You could make up an innocent reason, such as a study party between the members of your guild.”

“Hmm. I dunno if that’ll fly, but I guess I can try?”

I don’t have much freedom at home, but maybe Grandpa will give me permission when Dad isn’t around?

My grandfather might be more willing to listen to me; unlike my dad, he didn’t require me to live like a caged bird. Dad was the one in charge of me, though, so he didn’t go out of his way to step in much.

“Yes. It’s a bridge you’ll have to cross either way, so I say it’s best to do it now. It will also help to have Takashiro understand your circumstances better.”

“We’ve never done this before. I don’t know how it’s gonna go, but I’m worried. It’s fine with Kotomi and Yuuna, but with a boy there...”

“Your family is far too stuffy. We have much more freedom in my home.”

“Maybe a little too much freedom.”

Nozomi was a little uninhibited, but the real criminal was her older brother, Ryuutarou. He was past uninhibited and more uncontrollable. It was hard to believe how *normal* he looked in real life. In fact, Ryuutarou was already managing several major companies. People all over loved him.

“Well, if you need anything, you can call me over.”

“Huh?! You’re kidding!”

My family and Nozomi’s family had been bitter rivals forever. The two just did not get along well. If they knew that Nozomi and I were friends, my dad and even my grandpa would be furious. Of course, since we were friends, I was perfectly fine with her coming over to hang out.

“I-I don’t think they’ll let it happen. They’re sure to say no.”

“That is fine.”

“What are you planning?”

“If one of the Akabane ladies were to come by, all attention would be focused on her, making Takashiro’s presence less noticeable. And if they said no to having me at their doorstep, well, it would at least soften them to the idea of a boy your age visiting. This is one tactic of negotiation, you see: you demand something greater than what you truly want, making it seem as though you’re compromising when they say no.”

“Oh, I get it. So we assume they’ll say no. Okay! I’ll tell my family. Can I use your name specifically, Nozomi?”

“Yes, do just that. If meeting Takashiro makes a fire burn in your heart, the confession ought to come naturally. I suggest you start practicing for the perfect moment well in advance.”

“Practicing for the perfect moment... Oh! That reminds me. Nozomi, what was it like when you asked your boyfriend out?”

I was dying to know! I mean, I’d have to take notes from the experienced one. For my plans, I would need a good idea of where and when would be best to say it.

“Oh? Are you interested in that?”

“Yes! Please tell me, Master!”

“Well, it’s not the most entertaining story. I simply told him that I had something to say, and I asked him for his thoughts.”

“Uh-huh. Did he say he wanted to go out with you too?”

“No, he was quite stubborn. In the end, I told him to surrender and tell me that he liked me or wanted to go out with me. That is when he finally said it.”

“Hahaha... That kinda sounds like you did all the work.”

“Yes. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself—it’s the fastest and simplest way. Especially seeing as Takashiro’s so focused on gaming, I doubt he would broach the subject himself.”

“Hmm. Yeah, true.”

“So you see, it is up to you. Go and speak to your family at once.”

“Oh, wait. Everyone’s busy with the whole Aswarth’s thing, so we should wait until after that’s all settled. Ren’s trying so hard for me, after all. I’ve gotta help him out!”

“Then settle it quickly, please.”

“Will do.”

Okay, I gotta put in the work! After that, I’ll invite real-life Ren to my house!

Chapter 3: Me, the Benchwarmer!

I woke up early the next day, got ready in a flash, and logged in.

We still didn't have prospects for a plan to deal with the Hadean Rose that was blocking our way, so there wasn't much point in rushing back to the dungeon. I sent Maeda, Yano, and Shizuku messages saying that we wouldn't be assembling for runs today.

Even so, I was still full of enthusiasm! Crushing the meta to break through delays like this was true pleasure, especially since this race had the attention of all the students in the school! Foreign branch students like Emily and her friends, as well as outsiders like Shizuku, were also watching. If I did something big here, I'd stand out so much!

On top of all that, I had Akira's best interests at heart. I just had to succeed!

"Woo! What's on the agenda for today?!"

Full of vigor, I spawned at the floating cottage. Draco happily flapped over in my direction.

"Chirp! Good morning, Ren!"

"Hey, buddy! Have you been a good boy?"

Not long after, Akira showed up.

"Good morning! Let's give it our all today!"

Nice! She's ready and raring to go too.

"Hey, you're a lot more enthusiastic than yesterday."

"Huh? No, I'm not! I'm always enthusiastic. Heheh!" Akira gave a proud snort, her eyes sparkling. "So? What's the plan today? We've gotta find a way to win, right?"

Whoa, she's really hyped. Dunno why, but excitement is always good!

"Well, we don't really have any leads right now."

"Don't we have to boost your HP, seeing as it increases your ult's damage?"

"Yeah, but there's no good equipment for that at our level."

Many pieces of equipment came with level requirements. If your level wasn't high enough, you couldn't equip them. There were pieces of gear that gave good HP boosts, but they couldn't be equipped by our level range.

"What was it, the... Dress of Life?"

"Yeah."

It was sword dancer gear, but when sword dancers used healing dances, it would increase the target's maximum HP value for a while if

there was any overflow. It was the same effect as my dark Elemental Circle. Appearancewise, it was up there with Angelic Charm. Cute, sexy, and stunning—a real triple threat.

Sadly, its level requirement was 150. We were around level 80, and it would take a *ton* of time for us to double that. Had we been at the right level, I would've loved to get my grubby hands on it so I could see just how far the HP boost would go, along with some other testing.

I'd even considered getting our level 200 sword dancer buddy to try it out, though I didn't love the idea. Unfortunately—or fortunately?—it was only equippable by females, so Ryuutarou would not be able to put it on.

"It's a shame," I lamented. "That dress is just sublime, both in form and function. Who knew our level would be the problem?"

"If only we were stronger."

"Yeah. But being at a higher level would make the Hadean Rose stronger too, so that might open up a whole other can of worms."

Enemies inside Aswarth's Undersea Ruins were automatically adjusted to match the party's level. As we were around level 80, they were around our level of strength. In a party like Yukino's, where she was level 200, the enemies would be a lot stronger than the ones we fought.

It was always at a suitable difficulty no matter who challenged it, which was probably to make things fair. It was perfect for a big, all-out race.

Everyone was having trouble with the Hadean Rose, so that meant there were probably few to no differences between the monsters everyone encountered. But as the enemies increased in level, they would likely use new moves that we hadn't seen.

It was hard to tell who would have the easier time between level 80s like ourselves and the level 200s. But Yukino seemed to have it rough too, so the dungeon was brutal even for top-level players like her.

"Well, once we level higher, we should get it! I gotta see you wearing it."

"Huh? Okay, sure, but I'm not gonna wear it all day. As soon as we get the Rainbow Guard, I plan to wear it every day forever! I'd be embarrassed to wear the dress, so..."

"Don't worry, Akira. I know you can pull it off."

"Haha. I'm glad you always say that, at least."

"By the way, I haven't seen you in the sword dancer gear for a while now."

"Nope, I haven't worn it. I've just been fighting in this yukata lately."

It was limited to the world of Summertide, but the yukata was a good piece of gear.

Pricey Yukata (F)

Type: Armor

Level: 1

DEF: 1

Wearable by all classes.

Effect: Max MP +50 and automatic MP recovery (5 MP/sec).

Depending on the element, my Elemental Circles added extra damage to attacks by allies within the circles. However, each extra attack used up the MP of the attacker. The Pricey Yukata canceled out that effect, making it a net positive and increasing our offensive abilities altogether. Therefore, we had to all wear yukatas.

Shizuku didn't like the Sword Dancer gear, anyway. According to her when she saw Akabane wearing it, it "wasn't suitable" for young people. We'd decided it was best to be a little more reserved in front of Shizuku.

"Ooh, I get it. You wanna see me in my sword dancer outfit, right?" Akira teased, poking me.

"D-Don't be silly. I'm trying to be serious right now. We don't have time to mess around."

I mean, yeah, I really *did* want to see the sword dancer gear. But I had to be prudent, or she might think I wasn't serious about winning.

"Hm? But if it makes you feel better, I don't think it's messing around."

"Okay! In that case, yes please!"

If Akira wanted to do it, I was glad to let her!

"That was sudden! What changed your mind so fast?!"

"I've gotta see it once in a while or I go into withdrawal!"

"Well, if you insist. Shizuku's not here either. Enjoy!"

Akira switched to her sword dancer gear for me.

Aaah, what a sight for sore eyes! I haven't seen this since the start of summer vacation! The yukata's nice, but this is Ol' Reliable. I'm all about the skin!

I thought it was a pretty superb ensemble. It retained her cuteness without being gratuitous. It was a real shame that it could make Akira's family angry enough to potentially take her out of school.

"Aww, yeah. That's the Akira I know and love!"

"Hahaha... Back off, buddy. You really don't hold back when you stare, huh? Any other girl would be ticked."

"Yeah, I know! I know who I'm dealing with here."

“Really? Well, okay, but I’m only cool with this in-game. In real life, you’ll have to be a little more careful.”

“Huh? In real life? Yeah, I know that much. I mean, in-game, it’s just like I’m enjoying a nice character design.”

“Are you sure? I’m not joking, y’know.”

“Think about it. I’d never see you wearing *this* in real life, anyway. I don’t think it’s worth worrying about.”

“Ahaha. You never knooooow...”

“You sure about that? Remember, you don’t live in the same world as a commoner like me.”

“We live in the same world! The same Earth, the same Japan!”

“Whoa, this is getting big.”

“Right? If you think about it like that, the difference between our families is tiny! You can be like, ‘Heheh, I’m gonna gold-dig her so hard that I’ll never have to work a day in my life!’”

“No, no, no. I’d never think something so awful!”

“Okay, jokes aside. Whether it’s IRL or in-game, we’re always having the most fun when we’re together, right? Or is it just me?”

“Nah, it’s not just you. You’re exactly right.”

“Then we live in the same world, don’t we? No matter what, I’m still Akira.”

She sounded so serious all of a sudden. I was a little overwhelmed.

“Um, sure.”

“Good. So, wanna get going?”

“Oh, hold on! Just a minute! Uhh, can you do a little twirl?”

“Hm? Sure! How’s this?”

“Yeeeah, nice! While we’re at it, how about you show me that Angelic Charm too?”

“Jeez. Are we ever gonna leave?”

Now she looks miffed!

“Yeah, yeah, we will! I just have to get my energy recharged first!”

“Okay, fine. Recharge your energy while you answer me this: where are we going today?”

“Hmm. That’s a toughie. Again, we’re kinda hurting for clues right now. How about we go and grab some Special Warp Stones? We’ll need them when we finally hit that breakthrough.”

Currently, we only had one Special Warp Stone. Save points were every ten floors from B51F onward, so without using a Special Warp Stone, we would have trouble making it to the next save point. Stocking up on more of them wouldn’t be a wasted effort.

“That sounds good. We should do what we can.”

“Yup, I’m satisfied now. Let’s get going! We can either get our Special Warp Stones from Aswarth’s or from the festival games.”

“We can’t do much alone in the dungeon. How about the festival games?”

“Sounds good. I still haven’t gotten mine yet. Time to make a quick profit!”

“Woo!” she cheered. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

We’re not going for fun, Akira! This is farming for valuable items for our victory!

With that, we walked to the festival’s gaming area to grab some Special Warp Stones.



Last time, we’d really enjoyed the nighttime scenery, but it gave off an entirely new vibe during the day. It wasn’t bad at all! Though it was still early morning, the place was full of vigor. And by full, I mean literally *full*; the lines were super long. The people waiting in line were mad as heck, and the air was just tense.

Hey, what in the world? This place is packed!

My dad had once shown me a photo of a gaming store on the release day for a DQ game—and even that couldn’t compare to this! It was kind of like an attraction at a super popular theme park.

“Whoa, check it out!”

“That line is huuuge!” Akira shouted. “I wonder what’s going on?”

There could only be one reason for all this hustle and bustle so early in the morning.

“I get it. Runs are halted because of the Hadean Rose, so people are stocking up on Special Warp Stones in the meantime.”

Special Warp Stones were obtainable as exchanges from the counter at Aswarth’s, but they were guaranteed rewards here as long as you won the game.

She frowned. “That makes sense, but how is anyone supposed to play like this? Waiting in that line is gonna take forever. I can’t believe everyone’s actually doing it.”

“Y’know, the enthusiasm here is like what we encountered during the last guild mission.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take a look.”

I pointed at the booth where Yano had played the zombie-shooting game. At that very moment, a player beat the goal and got a Special Warp Stone.

“Wow, he got a Special Warp Stone! Good job.”

“Watch what happens after that,” I said.

After receiving the stone, the player went back to the very back of the line.

“Huh? He’s in line again! I thought you couldn’t get a second

Special Warp Stone from the same game.”

“Yeah. Can you guess why he’s in line again?”

“He just... really likes the game, doesn’t he?”

“Nope. He’s adding to the wait time intentionally to keep other players from playing.”

“Oooh. You might be right. Those guilds were blocking farming spots during the last mission.”

“They’re merciless. Throw enough people in line for the game, and other guilds get fewer chances to win.”

The other guilds were willing to use any methods at their disposal. This was a special group tactic available to the guilds with the most people. We were a small guild, so we physically couldn’t perform such large-scale interference. The idea had never even occurred to us.

“Ugh, we can’t get in line now. It’d be heartbreaking if we stood there for hours and failed to get anything.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I doubt a few Special Warp Stones will make a big difference in the end, anyway.”

Normal Warp Stones would force you out of the dungeon after a thirty-minute trip, but that was just about perfect for progressing five floors. After B51F, however, save points were every ten floors instead of five. Once you reached that point, you were really pressured to use Special Warp Stones for their hour-long duration.

The Special Warp Stone would give you the necessary time to proceed, but it wouldn’t necessarily give you enough time to fight off the Hadean Rose. For example, we could choose to ignore the Hadean Rose in an attempt to hack away at its Black Roses. With enough time, we might reach a breakthrough that way, but it didn’t seem likely. If that kind of time limit weren’t a problem down in Aswarth’s, people would’ve already tried the prolonged-battle strategy by now.

That made the Hadean Rose even more difficult to conquer. The only thing that would give you enough time for a prolonged battle would be the Super Special Warp Stone. With that, your time limit was two hours. Even if you used a full hour on progression, you would have another hour to play around with the Hadean Rose.

“Are you saying we need more time?” Akira asked me.

“That we do. One hour won’t let us test anything.”

“So we’ve gotta get the Super Special Warp Stone.”

“Correct. With that, we’ll have plenty of room to experiment.”

As luck would have it, we had one. Shizuku had given us the one she’d won a while back. We hadn’t brought it into the equation yet, though, as using it without certainty of success would have been silly. We were still aiming for quick wins, so we wanted to save it.

Our comp wasn’t exactly meant for prolonged battles. Rather, I

wasn't meant for them! Going even further, *my wallet* wasn't meant for them!

Sorry, but I just can't throw away money for an entire hour straight!

If we couldn't do that, then we were weak. After all, the composition was based on my drama cannon.

Hunting down tons of Black Roses was a daunting task, especially since we couldn't gather all enemies in one spot at will like Emily's armor knight class could. This party was simply a poor match for long-term battles against weak mobs.

"It doesn't feel right for us to use it, does it? We don't do well in long, drawn-out fights."

"Yeah. I'm scared to just waste it outright. But hey, at least Shizuku didn't give the SSWS to any other guilds. She was so uninterested in it that it wouldn't have surprised me."

"True! But if the Special Warp Stone section is this crazy, imagine the robot fighting game corner where you can get the Super Special one."

"Yeah. I bet it's a bloodbath in there."

"Wanna check it out?"

"Sure, why not?"

Off we went to the robot-fighting game venue!

"Yeeep. It's bad."

"Ahahaha..."

The size of the crowd here was just ridiculous. Ms. Nakada was managing things again today. It was a good thing they had a teacher here.

"Who is our next challenger?! For the first time in a while, we have a five-time winner!"

"Me, me, me, me!"

Dozens of people raised their hands. It must've been hell just trying to pick someone.

"Now, now. Anyone who wants to fight, gather up here!"

Ms. Nakada was swarmed almost immediately.

"I don't think they'll be done anytime soon," Akira muttered.

"For real. There are way too many people."

Maybe that was all according to plan for the big guilds, though. By wasting other people's time, they could stop Super Special Warp Stones from being distributed.

I wondered if they were keeping track of the current state of the competition and, when someone looked like they'd get ten wins, they'd send their strongest guild members out to try to shut them down. As a result, all of the high-level fighters would crush one another, resulting in no Super Special Warp Stones being given out.

"Well, that's fine. If they all waste their time dragging one another

down, that makes things easy for us.”

We weren’t seriously considering a prolonged battle against the Hadean Rose yet, but maybe that would be the most effective strategy after all. If all the people who *would* want to try it got stuck here, then that was just what we wanted. In the end, time would pass, and nobody would make it out with the SSWS.

“If we can find our breakthrough here,” I declared, “we can win this.”

“Then does that mean there’s no point staying here? It’s best if we just leave them, right?”

“Yeah. Let’s go somewhere else.”

We didn’t get anything, but it was nice to know what the situation was like. In a way, it was both a waste of time and not. It seemed like we had some short reprieve.

However, I still had some concerns regarding whether Yukino’s team had already obtained a Super Special Warp Stone, or if Emily’s pro gaming team had already devised a strategy. Either way, we had to find something for ourselves.

Just as we turned to leave the venue, someone onstage called out to us.

“Oh! Ren, Akira! Heeey, over here!”

“Hm?”

“Hey, it’s Emily!”

Akira was right; Emily was waving at us from atop the stage. Seeing as it was so packed, we hadn’t seen her before. *Was she waiting offstage for them to pick an opponent?* I wondered.

“Emily! Were you the one with the winning streak?!”

“Yep, that’s me! But as you can see, it takes time to find an opponent because there are so many people. Who knows when I’ll get my tenth win? It’s kinda annoying, honestly.” She heaved a sigh.



“So, y’all decided you needed a Super Special Warp Stone too, huh?” I asked her.

“Honestly, we’re kinda split on it. I went to the dungeon with Lucas and the others once, but we lost. Now we’re stuck thinking up a strategy. And it’s not like having the stone would be a *bad* thing, so I figured I’d just come get it! Everyone else is off trying to get items too.”

“Uh-huh. So your progress is about the same as ours, eh?”

“Everyone is stuck on the Hadean Rose, then,” Akira surmised.

Emily nodded. “Yeah, I think so. If anyone had won yet, they’d be the talk of the town. So how about you guys? You have a Super Special Warp Stone, right? Did you use it and lose?”

“Nah, we still have it. We’re not exactly built to fight the rose until all its little flowers are gone. But hey, we’ll find another way.”

“Heheheh! I’m not surprised. Your one-shot drama cannon can’t hold up in longer fights, can it? Heck, your party might be better off switching you out for someone else. Are you gonna keep looking for a way to make it a burst fight?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much our only chance.”

“Well, you do you. It’s important to put on a good show! If it goes well, you’ll be a star. We’ll be sure to celebrate your victory!”

“Thanks! Good luck, Emily. We’ve got places to be, so we’ll catch you later!”

“Good luck to you, Akira. Keep Ren in line!”

“Okay. Bye!”

After saying our goodbyes to Emily, we decided to leave the festival. Akira seemed a little bit off.

“Hey, Ren? You could’ve stayed to watch Emily fight, if you wanted. Are you sure you wanna leave?”

“Wha? No, it’s all good. We know what we need to do now.”

“Huh?! Really? When did you figure that out?”

“That conversation with Emily gave me an idea. First, let’s head back to the cottage and get everyone together. I’m ready to use that Super Special Warp Stone!”



Just under an hour after we made it back to the cottage, everyone was assembled. Fortunately, nobody was busy or about to go out. Phew! Besides Akira and me, we had Maeda, Yano, Akabane, Shizuku, and Kataoka. In total, there were seven people.

“Why am I here anyway, Takashiro? Need some info?” Kataoka asked.

Everyone else nodded, looking somewhat puzzled. It was only

natural that they'd wonder what was up, seeing as I'd told them they were free today but summoned them not long after.

"Nah, not quite. I'm thinking of finally using the Super Special Warp Stone that Shizuku gave us. I came up with the idea out of nowhere, so I had you all come here... out of nowhere."

"Oho. My prize will be of assistance to you, then?" said Shizuku, giving a satisfied smile. "Fantastic."

"Yeah! It'll be a huge help. Also, sorry to have called you out so suddenly."

"No, it's quite fine. I'm not always able to come at a moment's notice, but I happened to be free today."

"Thanks!"

"So what am I doing? Should I grab something, gather information, or what?" Kataoka pressed.

"What are you talking about? I said we're using the SSWS, so you're going to the dungeon, of course. It'll give you a ton of time, so the strategy today is to see if you can ignore the Hadean Rose and kill its Black Roses until it finally stops summoning them. If it does stop at some point, then, you can kill the Hadean Rose."

In a battle-of-attrition approach, this was the first thing I wanted to try out. Considering how willy-nilly that thing was shooting out seeds, it wouldn't be surprising if there was a way to bypass the fight by waiting for it to run out of ammo.

The big problem was that the necessary Super Special Warp Stones were as scarce as could be. It was possible that nobody besides us had one. The only known way of getting them was, as we saw before, overcrowded and being blocked by other guilds. Nobody was getting any stones from that. Maybe Emily was skilled enough to win her way through, but even then, it would take some time.

Now was our chance. If the Hadean Rose was indeed weaker in a drawn-out battle, then we could overtake the other parties now.

My drama cannon would have to take a backseat here, unfortunately, but I needed to put the mission first. It was a fight to the last, and the ball was in our court! As a result, I was prepared to make an unusual sacrifice bunt!

"I'm into it. If we can throw in a Super Special Warp Stone and win, then I say we go all in."

"I agree. These stones are scarce enough that I don't think anyone's used one yet. But if we want to claim victory, we should give it a try."

Yano and Maeda both sided with me.

Akabane nodded. "Fair enough. I don't see a problem. Perhaps that is why the Super Special Warp Stones exist in the first place."

"There you have it, Ren," Shizuku said. "This feels like an

unusually normal strategy for you, but I suppose that's natural if there's no other way."

"Yeah, I think that sums it up."

"Okay, I getcha. Again, *what* am I doing?"

"Kataoka, did you listen at all? We're using the Super Special Warp Stone, and we need your help with the boss."

"Huh? Am I going? Then what the heck kind of party are we taking?"

Kataoka raised an eyebrow. Everyone else had a similar reaction. We *did* have seven people here, after all, which was one more than the maximum allowed.

So, why had I assembled all seven of us? That was the question on everyone's minds.

"Okay! I will now announce the members of this expedition party! As mentioned already, we have Kataoka! Along with him, we're sending Shizuku, Maeda, Yano, Akabane, and Akira! Woo! Good luck, everyone!"

I clapped as a way of livening up the presentation.

"What?!" everyone exclaimed at once.

"That's why you called me?!" Kataoka shouted.

"Dang, are we really doing this without you?" Yano asked. "I guess you do just kinda sit around a lot in that dungeon, huh?"

"But Takashiro's the one who does most of our strategizing. Without him..." Maeda trailed off.

"Yeah, Kotomi, you're right. It'll be tough."

"Don't worry, girls. It's a simple enough job, and you have Akira with you today."

Without me around, Akira would be a fine leader. I could vouch for her there. My best friend was a capable one! She always enjoyed watching me work, so no doubt she would play along with my plans.

"We're serious about victory this time," I went on. "There's no redefinition, awakening, or giant-killing here, so the plan makes it clear that I'm best suited to be the benchwarmer this time. That means picking someone who's better for the plan."

We weren't going for a one-shot win, but a long-term battle to wait out the Black Roses. There was no room for me in this plan.

Though my ultimate was supposed to be done once per battle, I was bypassing it by destroying my weapons and reforging them. But in a fight with so many small mobs, if I destroyed my weapon for every single one I killed, my wallet would run out before the seeds did.

As my level rose, so did the cost of each forged Canesword. Financing was extremely difficult. I was benching myself, but it was for the best in every way.

Too bad, so sad!

“Ren! Weird plans are normal for you by now, but this is totally abnormal! Are you sure about this?”

Akira looked lonely.

“Yes, ma’am. Remember what Emily said about taking me out of battles of endurance? Well, I figured she was right. I was only considering plans that included me, but if we want to focus on victory, then I have to give that up. I mean, if you have other ideas, I’m happy to hear them out.”

“But that doesn’t sound like fun,” she protested. “What’s the point of gaming if it’s not fun? It doesn’t sound like you at all, Ren.”

“Meh. We don’t really have a choice this time. Besides, if the plan works, I can still be proud! That’s enough for me to be okay with sitting on the sidelines.”

“I know you’re trying to help me, Ren, but I can’t let you suffer because of it.”

“It’s not that deep, bro. It’s just one time! Either way, we’ve only got one Super Special Warp Stone, and I’d hate to fail to get the Rainbow Guard and let your family take you out of school. We do what we have to do to make sure you can be safe and happy gaming.”

“Ren, do you like playing with me?”

“Heck yeah, I do. What kind of question is that?”

“Really? Okay, good. Then I’ll do my best! Honestly, thinking about it objectively, then Kataoka really is better for longer fights with lots of baddies.”

“Heh... It does kinda hurt to hear that from you! Dammit, I’m gonna get you back for that one!”

“Ahahaha! You seem fine, so I guess I shouldn’t worry. We won’t be long; just wait for me!”

“Absolutely. Good luck!”

I would wait at the floating cottage for my friends’ return while doing whatever testing I could.

“That’s a wise decision, Takashiro. Worry not; we will defeat the Hadean Rose. I will take care of Akira in your absence, and rest assured that your sacrifice won’t be in vain,” Akabane said to me, sounding oddly happy about it.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m dying!”

“I understand your desire to participate in these dungeon runs, so I must show my respect for your difficult decision.”

What in the world? She’s in a ridiculously good mood. But whatever. It’s not like she was ever really mean in the first place, so I doubt she’s happy to see me left out.

Is she just happy that she gets to have girl talk with Akira, maybe? She would be, seeing as she wanted to be Akira’s friend so badly.

Lately, Akabane had been a lot nicer than her previously prickly self. She and Akira were always talking these days. I figured that was a good sign.

Even if she did something slightly weird, her brother was so outlandish that anything she did could be ignored with ease. In all ways, we could be lenient with her.

“You seem excited, Akabane. Were you looking forward to hanging out with Akira without me?”

I’d expected a cold shoulder sort of reaction from her. “*Absolutely not! I am simply speaking the truth!*” or something like that.

Instead, Akabane looked at me with exasperation and said, “Excuse me? What are you talking about? People and their relationships are meant to change. We aren’t the same people we were before, even if *you’re* apt to never change.”

“Um, okay? I don’t entirely get it, but that’s pretty deep. Very philosophical.”

I had no idea what she was trying to say.

“Hmph. Well, it matters not. You have made your feelings known, and I do not mind helping out. I am in your debt, after all. If necessary, I could even ask my brother to lend a hand.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want to ask for too much.”

Definitely not from him. I don’t want to touch him with a ten-foot pole.

I at least had to admire his, uh, *skill* in getting the gear from the Death Chariot. Without him, we never would have figured that out. So sure, maybe I owed him some thanks.

But even after getting that gear, I was warming the bench. Unfortunately, the strat just rubbed me the wrong way.

Kataoka was behind me in maximum firepower, but he could put out some good damage without spending money. If I tried to emulate him, I would run out of MP and be useless for the rest of the time. MP being short for Money Power, of course!

Just as I was starting to see hope too! I couldn’t help but feel bad about it. If there had been no hope to begin with, I might’ve come up with this strategy much sooner.

But it wasn’t too late. We hadn’t heard of other parties getting Super Special Warp Stones, and they couldn’t be mass-produced yet either. Hopefully, we could still overtake the rest of the teams!

As the gang left for Aswarth’s, I called out, “Good luck, everyone! I’ll be cheering you on from here.”



After entrusting the mission to everyone, I was left alone in the floating cottage. Feeling glum, I watched the sea, sighing to myself.

“Chirp! Ren, go! Ren, go!”

Worried, my boy Draco flew over to me.

Awww. What a sweet little dragon he is, caring about his master.

I held him in my arms and petted his little head.

“Heh, thanks. I’m doing my best, Draco.”

Still, I let out another sigh. Things couldn’t always go as planned. At times like this, I needed to bench myself for the good of the team.

Though I believed in my decision to back off for Akira’s sake, it still felt all wrong! What I really wanted to do was to gallantly defeat the Hadean Rose and win the Rainbow Guard for her.

I wasn’t one of those guys who offered up everything to Himechans, though. I just wanted to look cool.

That said, I couldn’t just sit here sighing away like a loser. Since I’d sent them off to do the dirty work, I figured I should do something productive too.

“But the question is, what?”

Maybe I ought to go gather intel at Homura’s Item Museum again? Or return to the game stands and get in line? Emily is still on top, so maybe I ought to come forward as a challenger.

Otherwise, I could also go visit the Island Bunnies for more testing. Not that it has to be them, but just for the sake of any testing that might help us in the future. After all, even if we beat the Hadean Rose with the Super Special Warp Stone, we don’t know what might come after.

I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I just wasn’t suited for Aswarth’s, though. Each floor had its own condition to open the way, but having the ability to kill a ton of enemies quickly was a common requirement. For example, a gate might require you to kill all the enemies on a floor or defeat a certain number of waves of undead.

It was a little late to say this, but I just didn’t do well in those situations.

Using my ultimate moves on small-fry enemies was just pointless overkill. Activating my expensive attacks over and over for no good reason meant losing my Money Power too fast to make up for. Between every single ultimate, I would have to craft new weapons and wait for the cooldown of Final Strike, the thing that allowed me to craft the weapons to begin with.

Final Strike’s cooldown time could be skipped if I had a sword dancer use Sword Samba, but that meant using up the sword dancer’s AP. In a battle against several smaller enemies, it would be a lot faster for them to just attack normally.

Avoiding my ultimates because they were overkill just widened the performance gap, though.

My new magic, the Elemental Circle, added elemental damage to each normal attack. But instead of using my MP, it used the MP of the person benefiting from it. The dark circle specifically absorbed HP and

increased maximum HP if there was any overflow, while the light circle did the same with MP.

Because it used up MP with each strike, it could interfere with allies if not used carefully. Yet if there was a light circle or some other MP recovery method, it could be a useful support ability.

At this point in time, I didn't have a way to secure any circles other than dark. Thanks to us being in Summertide, we could at least use the yukatas that made up for its deficit.

But if that was all I could do, then throwing a rogue like Kataoka into the fray to just smack things around and throw out powerful arts would make for a smoother run. It was like upgrading from "useless supporter who can't keep up with the party" to "slightly useful guy."

Killing tanky, high-HP enemies and bosses in one hit was the symbologist drama cannon's reason for being, but it seemed the Hadean Rose didn't quite get the memo on that one.

If the devs meant for us to use Super Special Warp Stones to defeat bosses in battles of attrition, then what if future bosses were the same way? I would be completely useless!

Usually, it wasn't a problem for me to take enemies down at my own pace. In a competition, however—and one we couldn't afford to lose, at that—I needed to be taken out for the sake of efficiency.

"I guess that means... I need to find a way to fix myself."

I didn't want to be on the bench forever! It was time for me to set out. Akira and the others could take care of the Hadean Rose, no problem.

"All right! Let's take a walk, Draco!"

"Chirp! Ren happy!"

"Yeah! I can't just sit around and be bummed out forever. We've gotta go on a hunt."

Just as I headed for the entrance of the cottage, however, I ran into a familiar face.

"Baaawk! Ren, are you around, bawk?!"

Oh, it's Kokoru! He looks pretty upset.

"I'm right here. What's the matter, bud?"

"Oh, Ren! Thank goodness you're here, bawk!"

"Chirp! Chicken, chicken!"

Draco flapped over to Kokoru and started chomping on his head. He loved giving the guy little nibbles.

"Bagawk?! Why do you always do this, bawk?! Don't prey on meee!"

As usual, I had to get between them or we'd never make progress. It happened every single time.

"So, what's up? Did you need me?"

"Yeah, bawk! You've gotta help me, bawk!"

“Sure, but what happened?”

“Th-There’s big trouble at my house! It’s like a den of monsters now!”

“Huh?! How did that happen?!”

“They did it all for me, baww!”

“What do you mean?”

“Thanks to your help, I’m a knight of Mishuria now, baww. My pops was real happy, and so were my momma and my brothers. I was doing my best, baww!”

“Yeah, of course. You look more like a knight now too.”

Kokoru was wearing a suit of armor, but since he was so fat and round, it looked comical and cute instead of cool and imposing. Silly as he looked, though, Kokoru had topped the hero-raising event from a while back. That event had been a pretense for us to help develop the people who would shoulder Mishuria’s future.

Afterward, Kokoru had returned home, where he was knighted. It had been a big deal, and I’d been prouder than ever.

I’d brag to all the world, “I raised that boy!”

“So what does that have to do with your house being a den of monsters?”

“You know the way I fight, baww. I can’t fight on my own, so I’ve gotta use Golden Sweets to hire monsters to fight for me, baww.”

“Oh, I see. I think I know where this is going!”

According to Kokoru, his father had started wrangling monsters in hopes of helping him fight. After that, they started going wild and taking control of the place.

“Then it spiraled out of control, huh?”

“That’s right, baww! One of the monsters my pops brought home was a real crazy one, baww!”

I get it. Kokoru’s dad tried to help him, but it ended up making things worse. Y’know, maybe this is partly my fault? After all, I raised that boy.

If I hadn’t emphasized the Golden Sweets strategy and made Kokoru successful enough to become a knight, none of this would have happened. I should probably take some responsibility for this and help him out.

“Baww, I know you’re busy with the Aswarth’s stuff, but I really need a hand! Please help me, baww!”

“Don’t worry about that, Kokoru. I’ll help you out! Let’s go to your house!”

“Baww! Thank you, baww! I feel so much better with you around!”

“Aww, c’mon. I’m not that—”

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

Suddenly, I got a system notification! A message appeared along

with it.

Limited Quest "Drama at the Kokoru Family Home!" has begun!

Ooh, a limited quest! Limited to only our guild, that is.

"Well, let's get to it! Sorry you're stuck with just me and Draco, though."

"Bawk? I don't mind, but where are the girls, bawk?"

"Well, they're off at Aswarth's."

"Huh?! Why aren't you with them? I'm glad you're here, bawk, but..."

"I'm just not part of the strat this time, that's all. Sucks, but I'm no good against this boss, so I'm stuck here at home. Heh."

"Bawk... D-Don't be sad, bawk! Ren, you're not *all* big damage! You taught me how to fight too! You're smart, bawk, and that's what really matters!"

"Hahaha! Sorry for making you worry, Kokoru. I'm fine, so let's get going!"

I patted Kokoru on the back, and we left the cottage. I didn't mind being asked for help while I stared wistfully at the sea. It was nice to feel needed, after all.

This quest was limited to our guild alone, so it was the perfect time to change my frame of mind and kick some butt!

Chapter 4: Home Makeover—a Den of Monsters! Part 1

After leaving the floating cottage, the three of us headed to Mishuria, where Kokoru's house was. We exited Summertide to the floating island of Telluna, where we attended school. From there, we boarded an airship to Mishuria. The airships went to the city where Kokoru lived, so just one trip was enough to take us there.

“So, where's your house?”

“Over there, bawk.”

Kokoru pointed at a huge mansion on a hill overlooking the airship station. Its white walls were spotless, while its roof had accents of red. The red was mostly focused toward the tip-top of the mansion.

A white base with red accents? Yep, that's a chicken coop! No doubt in my mind—that's Kokoru's place!

There was a weathercock at the very top of the mansion too.

Leaving aside the incredible representation of chicken people in this game, this mansion was absolutely gargantuan. How many rooms did it even hold? It looked more like a place where royalty or nobility might live.

“It's huge! Is your family really that rich?!”

“Yeah, bawk. My pops is a big merchant, bawk.”

“That's insane. I'm jealous.”

Game or not, my house looked like a rabbit hutch compared to this mansion. It was still perfectly big enough for me, and I was always thankful for my hardworking parents. But how would it feel to live in a place like this?

Is Akira's house like this in real life? She is a rich girl. Maybe Kokoru would understand Akira better... or not, since he's an NPC. He's so ridiculously well written that he seems like a normal, living being.

Aah, what a well-crafted game. I did hear it has the most cutting-edge AI technology in it.

“It's not as great as you think, bawk. When I was chosen as a hero candidate, people said I was so weak, I only got in because of my pops's connections, bawk. It's always been like that since I was just a chick. Sometimes, I wished I wasn't their son, bawk.”

“Dang. That's raw, buddy.”

I felt like that wasn't all too rare in real life. How could the developers give this cute, silly chicken such a sad backstory?

“I told Akira about it before, and she said she understands, baww. Do you think she’s like me?”

“Akira said that?”

“Yeah, baww. But she said she has fun with you, and things would get easier if I joined your guild. And, by baww, she was right!”

“Ooh, I’m glad to hear it! Warms my heart.”

“I can only believe in myself because of you guys, baww, so I want you and Akira to keep being good friends. No arguing, baww, got it?”

Oh, huh. Does Kokoru think we got in a fight just because we aren’t together?

Kokoru was such a nice NPC, worrying about little things like that. He’d always been a good guy, really. No matter how big and strong he got, that would never change.

“We’re not, bro. You helped us with it before, but we’re still working to get Akira’s Rainbow Guard. Our party for this next hurdle is optimal, even if I am kinda sad that I’m not part of it.”

“Baww. I get it. You wanna get Akira’s present yourself, right, baww?”

“Yeah. I *wanted* to, at least. But we were running out of time, and I had to prioritize actually getting the armor.”

And I still don’t think I was wrong to do that! It just sucks.

“All for Akira, baww.”

“Yep. I put myself on the bench just for her. Anyway, let’s forget all that! Let’s clean up your house!”

“Thanks, baww! Thanks to you guys, I’m so much more confident, and the family’s a lot happier. That’s why my pops wanted to help me a little too much, baww. His intentions were good, but we need to put a stop to the monsters before they start hurting people in town. Baww!”

“Darn right!”

As we made our way closer, I noticed that there was a translucent barrier erected around the mansion.

Is that actually effective? At the very least, I don’t see any monsters trying to leave their property.

Beast-type monsters loitered around the courtyard, while birds perched on the roof. Inside, it looked like there were a lot of human-shaped monsters. And I mean *a lot*.

It looked like the monsters had the run of the place. Where would we even begin?

In front of the mansion was a crowd of worried spectators watching over the pandemonium. No surprise there; it looked like the monsters couldn’t escape the barrier, but it would be a disaster if they were to break free.

The townsfolk should have run away, but either out of curiosity or

just to dial up the tension for the quest, they continued to loiter. Kokoru's father was among them. When he saw us, he ran over with his little chicken legs.

"Oh, Kokoru! You brought Ren! Now I feel so much better, bawk."

"Cheep! Master returns, cheep!"

"We've got this in the bag now, cheep!"

"Our master can do something about this, cheep!"

Kokoru's cheepy little brothers crowded around me. They were absolutely adorable.

"Hey, kids. I heard you were in trouble, so I came to help out!"

"Chirp! Cheepies, cheepies!"

Draco seemed to like the chicks too, as he chased them around.

"Aaahh! Nobody asked for you, cheep! Ruuun! Cheep!"

What a lively gathering. Maybe all chicken people hate pet dragons.

Kokoru was just as terrified of Draco since he loved to give him little nibbles on the head.

"Would you boys shut up, bagawk?! Daddy's having an important conversation! Sorry they're all so loud, bawk."

"Eh, I don't mind. It's my boy Draco's fault for messing with them, anyway. So, what should we do about those monsters?"

"Bawk! I wanted to help little Kokoru here be the knight he was born to be, so I started raising monsters in the house so he could use them whenever he wanted. But then, bawk..."

"Something went wrong, and things escalated from there?"

"Precisely, bawk! I got this really rare one because I wanted to help him so bad, bawk... But then my wife started leading a monster uprising in the house! Now they've gone and occupied it, bawk-bawk!"

"Huh?! Your wife?!"

Only then did I realize that Kokoru's mom wasn't around.

Is that what happened? Kokoru didn't tell me about that part.

"Bawk?! I didn't know that either!"

"That's because I didn't tell you, bawk. I didn't want you to panic before you went to grab Ren, bawk. Here I was praying she would come back to her senses while you were gone."

"Do you have any idea why this happened?"

"I'm not sure, bawk. While I was trying to grab some helpful monsters for Kokoru, maybe one of them was a real nasty one... bawk."

"This isn't some dumb argument between you guys, is it, bawk?"

"N-No, my boy! Bagawk! We're as happy as can be, bawk! In fact, we were just trying to make you some new brothers and sisters—"

"Baaawk! I don't wanna hear about what my parents are doin' at night, bawk! You're embarrassin' me, bawk!"

Wow. I really had to side with Kokoru here. I was frankly a little worse off for having heard that.

“Cheep?! Our family’s growing, cheep!”

“Yaaay! Cheep cheep!”

“What should we name them, cheep?!”

Aww, these little cheepers are so young and innocent.

“Finally, we get our own underlings! Chee-hee-heep!”

“I’m gonna push ’em around, cheep!”

“Let them experience the pain of life! Cheep!”

Oh. Never mind.

We were busy, so I decided to ignore the little psychopaths. They were Kokoru’s problem, not mine. I needed to pivot to the problem at hand instead of these scary young villains.

“So, y’see, I don’t wanna tell the knights and make it a whole big thing, bawk. What if my wife gets locked up in prison?! I think she’s being controlled by some baddie, bawk.”

“Hmm. That does sound likely.”

“Right now, the barrier I made with our product is still working. The monsters can’t escape, bawk! You’ve gotta do something right now!”

“Yes, sir! I follow so far, but how do I actually get inside?”

The barrier surrounded the entire estate, so it didn’t look like we’d be able to find an easy way in. I tried touching the barrier since it was right in front of me, but I felt a pretty strong pushback.

“Take this with you, bawk! This charm will let you into the barrier, bawk.”

Kokoru’s dad handed me a charm.

“I want one too, bawk!”

“Of course, my boy. Here’s one for you too! Bad as the situation is, I’m glad I can count on you when the going gets tough, bawk. You’re such a big man now.”

“Bawwwk... Don’t butter me up until we come back safe, bawk.”

“Go and save Momma for us, bawk!”

“Yes sir, bawk! Let’s get going, Ren!”

“Woo! We got this!”

With charms in hand, Kokoru and I entered the barrier. Rather than pushing me away this time, it sucked me right in.

“All right, boys! Let’s win this!”

“Bawk! Leave it to me, bawk!”

“Chirp! Chichirp!”

My two companions were good and fired up. Without Akira or another sword dancer, my firepower would be way lower, but I still had to do my best for Kokoru.

To make my drama cannon as OP as it was, my ultimates always

included Final Strike to ensure that I dealt major damage. Final Strike had a five-minute cooldown, so I couldn't use it multiple times in succession. I usually had Akira use her Sword Samba on me to bring it off cooldown immediately, doubling my instant firepower.

As it was just Kokoru and myself, I would have to wait a long time after using my ultimate. That meant I had to think carefully about when to use it. Without my ultimate, all I had on me was the symbologist's bottom-of-the-barrel abilities.

Altogether, my best option was to use Elemental Circle to squeeze out damage. It gave me a little bit of fighting ability in times like this. I mean, that was probably what it was intended to do. It was time to take up the mantle and fight!

"Brrrargh!"

As we entered the courtyard, monsters immediately blocked our way. They were like giant bulls, each with a giant horn protruding from its head. Their eyes were ridiculously bloodshot. They were called Horned Buffalo.

I didn't know what had made them so mad, but they were downright enraged.

"Here I am, baw! You don't get to rampage around *my* house! Come to me, baw, Infernal Armor!"

Kokoru summoned a flashy, orange suit of armor. It was empty on the inside, mobilized by some unknown power. It was basically a monster in the form of living armor.

"Combine, baw!"

Clink, cling, clang! Kaching!

Accompanied by cool, metallic noises, Kokoru turned into a fully armored knight! This was the Armor Possession skill that monsters like the Infernal Armor could use. I had to give it props for changing its shape to fit the round, little body of a chicken.

By doing this, Kokoru's stats went up to match those of the Infernal Armor. Anyone stronger than the armor would've been weakened by it, but for Kokoru, it was a dramatic power-up. His baseline stats were too useless to fight with, so by using the Infernal Armor's Armor Possession skill, Kokoru could wield his true power.

You could say he was like a tokusatsu hero!

"Baaaw!"

He charged the enemy head-on, relying on the armor's strength to slam into them! After a painful-sounding *bonk!* a message popped up in the logs.

Infernal Armor attacked.
Dealt 163 damage to Horned Buffalo!

Hey, it worked!

From there, Kokoru and the Horned Buffalo duked it out. Kokoru had the advantage, grinding down the Horned Buffalo's HP over time.

It was time for me to get to work too! I couldn't let Kokoru take all the glory!

"Equipment Set D!"

Just like before, Set D was the full-on Death Chariot gear. After suddenly transforming into a tiny Death Chariot, I used my magic.

"Elemental Circle!"

As usual, I targeted my pet dragon with the effect. Draco's Target Marker skill changed my immobile circles into ones that followed him wherever he went.

A black circle appeared, just as planned.

"B-Bawk?! R-Ren, what the heck are you wearing?!"

Indeed, Kokoru hadn't met the Death Chariot, so this was his first time seeing the armor. It was natural that he'd been baffled by my sudden transformation into a mini Death Chariot in all its terrifying glory.

"If I change into this and use Elemental Circle, it always comes out dark!"

The dark circle came with an HP-absorption effect, which was very useful for the two of us since we didn't have healing magic. Well, it was possible that Kokoru had a monster in stock that could heal him.

"Equipment Set A!"

With that, I was back to normal. The Death Chariot armor came with ridiculous stat decreases and slowed me down, so I only donned it when I needed a dark circle.

Now that I was ready to go, I approached the Horned Buffalo and started to attack. I used my only viable normal attack, a simple shoulder charge.

You might recall that I was ignoring DEX to min-max my drama cannon damage, so my normal attacks always missed. My Canesword's normal strikes were mere illusions! Thus, the shoulder charge was the only thing that could actually strike.

Like hidden weapon arts, striking arts ignored evasion. There were several drawbacks: they weren't very strong, didn't combo well into other things, and cost HP along with AP to use. It was an unpopular style, but for someone who ignored DEX and put all their points into VIT, it was peerless.

Ren attacked.
Dealt 81 damage to Horned Buffalo!
Ren attacked.
Dealt 60 damage to Horned Buffalo!
Ren recovered 60 HP.
Ren's maximum HP increased by 60.

Mmm, that's the stuff!

Considering the sad damage on my normal attacks, the Elemental Circle was a major boon. I was much better at tickling enemies to death. Couldn't ignore the fact that it healed me too.

The extra effect sapped 5 MP each time it went off, but symbologist came equipped with Turnover by default, allowing me to swap my HP and MP at will.

Normally, I would reduce my MP to zero and use a hidden weapon art in my ult to make it deal way more damage. But if used for its original purpose of restoring MP, then I didn't have to worry about the MP-consumption effect of the dark circle.

Elemental Circle wasn't too shabby in these kinds of situations! I was definitely better off with it than without.

"Now I can heal *and* fight, bawk! Thanks!"

The Infernal Armor combined with Kokoru had MP, so the HP-absorption effect went off just fine. It also had high defense, so with the Elemental Circle's effect on top of it, his HP didn't go down at all. In fact, it was going up as his maximum HP continued to increase.

"That set looks gross, but the effect seems worth it, bawk!"

Kokoru had previously only seen my Elemental Circle when it was random. By limiting it to the dark circle, which had the best effect of the lot, I had made a dramatic improvement—even if, yes, I did look stupid as heck.

Gear isn't about looks! It's about stats!

Bad-looking gear that was both powerful and easy to obtain was pretty common in MMOs; some people would put it on as a group and look awful together.

"Yep. I'm praying for the day when symbologist's dark circles become a big hit and everyone's walking around town wearing Death Chariot gear!"

"That's a dark future, bawk..."

We took down incoming enemies while we chatted. Once they were down, we continued through the courtyard. More enemies came at us along the way, but we were able to defeat them and carry on without much issue.

Nothing was strong enough to require my ultimate, so the dark

circles were enough. Without it, we would've been really lacking. Again, I was much better off with it in my arsenal. Overall, it was good magic for shoring up symbolologist's main weakness.

That said, it wasn't *too* incredible. It would never be able to stand up to real offensive classes.

The drama cannon just couldn't deal real damage without using an ultimate. Using it here would be overkill and a waste of time, as this was one of those big small-fry battles I mentioned.

Thanks to the Elemental Circle, my ultimate-less score went from about a five out of a hundred, to fifteen out of a hundred. I'd tripled the number! That was huge progress.

After we finished culling the courtyard monsters and entered the mansion proper, I asked Kokoru, "Your mom's the one controlling these monsters, right? Do you know where she is?"

"Let's try going to her room first, baww. I'll lead the way!"

"Awesome. I'll be right behind you."

With Kokoru at the front, we ran through the super huge mansion. Watching Kokoru in full armor as he led the charge made me realize that his cowardice and unreliability from the guild competitive mission were long gone.

He was a real man now. As the man who had raised him, I grew even smugger.

"We'll be in a big lobby after this, baww! Momma's room is right upstairs from there on the third floor, baww!"

"Gotcha!"

Unlike the beasts that prowled outside, the monsters in the mansion were humanoid, like the living armor that Kokoru used and the various types of undead monsters. In terms of strength, they weren't much different from the others.

But I mean, imagine large mammals all running around a mansion. That just sounds annoying. Let those into your home, and you'd be cleaning up fur and droppings all day.

We continued to slay hordes of foes until we ran into an enormous door at the end of the hallway. According to Kokoru, this door would lead to a lobby.

"Let's open it!"

"Okay, baww!"

We slammed into the door, which flew open with a loud bang. This area was likely meant to be an entrance lobby. The ceiling was several floors up, leading to a skylight at the very top that let the gentle sunlight through.

A big spiral staircase connected the floors. There were gaudy furnishings all around, including expensive-looking golden implements and knickknacks. Many of them followed the basic

chicken motif.

Okay, guys, we get it. You're chickens.

Still, I was in awe of the place. It was practically a castle at this point!

In the middle of it all, a statue of a winged demon—I think they called them Gargoyles—stood before the staircase, guarding it. It was about twice my height. In a lobby this big, having huge monsters made sense, though.

The Gargoyle roared and glared at us with its ruby-red eyes.

"LEAVE THIS PLACE, OR FORFEIT YOUR LIFE!"

Ooh! Now that's a mid-boss!

He wanted us to leave, but we couldn't just do that. Was taking him down our only option?

"There's our mid boss, Kokoru! Let's crush him and keep going!"

"Yes, sir, baww!"

"DO YOU REFUSE TO LEAVE?"

The gargantuan Gargoyle's eyes burned brighter. He looked good and ready to kill us.

"This is my house! You're the one who'd better leave, baww! Get the heck outta here!"

"YOU WILL PAY FOR THAT!"

The Gargoyle inhaled deeply before breathing fire all over the place!

Fwoooooom!

Thick belts of fire fell upon us, dealing damage.

The Giga-Gargoyle spat fire!

Dealt 341 damage to Ren!

Dealt 332 damage to Infernal Armor!

"Owww, baww! I'm gonna be fried chickeeen!"

"Ngh! Not bad, for a mid boss!"

He wasn't as offensively powerful as the Death Chariot or the Hadean Rose, but there were only two of us. Our sole healing method was the HP absorption of my dark circles, which meant more of those flames would be bad news!

"Leave this to me, baww! Infernal Armor, end combination! Baww, you can leave!"

Kokoru sent his Infernal Armor home, returning to normal. He could only summon one monster at a time, so to switch to another, he would have to send his Infernal Armor back first.

"Frost Eagle, come to me! Baww!"

Heeding his call, a monstrous blue bird appeared. This was another monster Kokoru used during the guild mission. It felt nostalgic to see it after so long.

“Baww! Ren, get on!”

“Sure!”

Kokoru and I straddled the Frost Eagle’s back. It immediately soared upward and over the Giga-Gargoyle’s head. In such a large space, the Frost Eagle could maneuver with ease.

“*GRR! YOU INSOLENT LITTLE...*”

The Giga-Gargoyle continued to spit fire, aiming at the soaring Frost Eagle. However, he wouldn’t be able to hit us so easily now that we were in the air!

Fire struck multiple places in the lobby, scorching walls and floors black.

“Baww?! Stop burning my house, baww! Where are your manners?!”

“Indoor fires really are annoying!”

“Time to fight fire with ice, baww! Frost Eagle, use your blizzard!”

Letting out a loud screech, the Frost Eagle dodged the flames, then turned and showered the Giga-Gargoyle with its icy breath.

Frost Eagle spat out a Blizzard.

Dealt 35 damage to Giga-Gargoyle!

“Urk! It’s not working, baww!”

“Spewing flames doesn’t mean he’s weak to ice, huh?”

That said, the numbers were clearly against us. Our enemy was dealing 300 damage, while we only dealt 30. The Frost Eagle continued to do its best to freeze the enemy, but it didn’t deal much damage at all.

Just then, something dawned on me.

“Oh! That’s it!”

“Baww? What’s up, Ren?”

“When I give the signal, have the Frost Eagle dive in!”

“Um, okay, baww!”

Without changing gear, I cast a wide-range Elemental Circle to reduce my MP to almost zero. I was throwing my MP away to prepare for my ultimate.

“All right, dive in now!”

“Baww! Frost Eagle, dive at that Gargoyle!”

With another cry, the Frost Eagle dove right into the enemy.

What I’d noticed before was this Giga-Gargoyle’s HP bar. We had only dealt three to four hits of 30 damage—around 100 total—but his HP bar had already fallen a few percentages. Based on that, I

estimated his HP was somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000! It was one of those enemies with tons of defense but low HP.

Fortunately, my ultimate moves ignored defense! In other words, this was the perfect time for me to shine!

As the Frost Eagle charged into striking range, we were right in front of the Giga-Gargoyle. One blow, and he was gone!

“Ultimate move: Dead Eeend!”

Smaaaaaaash!

My blade glowed purple as it fell upon the Giga-Gargoyle!

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,984 damage to Giga-Gargoyle!

Ren has defeated Giga-Gargoyle.

“WAAAAARGH!”

The Giga-Gargoyle started to fall apart, the stones falling to the floor.

“I knew it! One blow was all it took!”

High-defense, low-HP enemies were the ideal prey for my drama cannon.

“Baww! Good job, Ren! You’re as strong as ever, baww!”

Kokoru jumped off of the Frost Eagle’s back and hopped around with joy.

I alighted too as I replied, “Well, this is my specialty! Without Akira, we’ll have to wait five minutes for the next one, though. Let’s stay here until it comes off cooldown, then we can keep going.”

“Good idea, bawk. Safety first.”

“Yeah. If only Akira were here, we wouldn’t need to wait.”

Akira and the others were doing important work, so there was no point in crying over it.

“Bahahawk. My, what useful information, bawk!”

I heard a chicken’s voice, but it was distinctly feminine.

Could it be...?!

I looked up to the top of the stairs, where the voice came from.

“Momma!” Kokoru called out.

Indeed, it was her. A black crystal pendant hung around her neck. It emitted a strange, dark aura that enveloped Kokoru’s mom.

“What’s that?! Is that what made your mom go mad?!”

“It’s gotta be, baww! There’s a weird miasma coming out of it! Baww, are you okay?! Come back to us, Momma!”

“Bawhawhawk! That won’t be happening, baww! Now that I have finally found a mortal vessel, I, the Dark Lord Veld, will use this as my

base to create a land ruled by fear! Baaawk!”

Who the heck is that? Was he sealed in there or something?

Kokoru seemed to be thinking the same thing. “The Dark Lord?! I dunno who you are, bawk, but were you trapped in that necklace?!”

“Indeed, bawk! In centuries past, my mortal form was destroyed and my soul sealed away in this necklace of black crystal! Long have I wandered between hosts, waiting for my ultimate revival, bawk! This is not the first time we have met, bawk—you may remember me as Froi Jasin!”

“Froi?!”

He had been one of the leaders of the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught, a land at war with Kokoru’s home of Mishuria.

So this guy was controlling Froi all that time? The same Froi who was a boss in a bunch of our quests? Then, once Froi went down, this necklace got put up on the market and Kokoru’s father bought it?! Who knew all of these plot threads would intertwine here? What a well-planned event!

“Heh. You don’t sound like much of a dark lord since you’re bawking up a storm.”

“Hmph! I am merely not used to this vessel yet, bawk! Once I am, both body and soul will return to my original form! For hundreds of years, I have slowly been regaining my strength in this dark crystal. Finally, I have the power to recreate my lost form, bawk!”

“Bawk?! What happens to my mamma, then?!”



“You will never see her again, baww! Consider it an honor that she could be the stepping-stone to my corporeality, baww!”

“Baaaww?! That ain’t happening, baww! Give me back my momma!”

“Kokoru, we need to get that necklace off of her!”

“Gotcha, baww!”

“Bahahaww! I do not fear a man who has no ultimate, baww! Prepare yourself, baww, for annihilation! Come, my monsters!”

“Groooooan!”

“Growrrrr!”

“Kshaaah!”

“Skreeeee!”

Heeding his call, droves of monsters forced their way into the lobby. Every exit was blocked!

“Baww?! That’s a lotta baddies, baww! Pops brought way too many home with him!”

“Good intentions gone wrong, huh? What’s the plan, buddy?”

“Let’s get back on the eagle, baww! We can buy time until you get your ultimate back, baww!”

“Good idea!”

The Frost Eagle let us on again and took flight.

“You will not escape me, baww!”

Kokoru’s possessed mother started casting and unleashed magic.

“Shadow Phoenix!”

A giant bird made of black flames chased after us. It was a guided missile—and faster than the Frost Eagle! The eagle tried desperately to avoid it, but in the end, it was struck.

“Caaaaw!”

Its feathers scorched, the Frost Eagle fell to the floor—and us along with it.

Ren took 300 damage from the fall!

Kokoru took 300 damage from the fall!

Falling from too high a height led to insta-death, so I was glad to get away with a small amount of damage.

“Oh no, Frost Eagle! Buddy, you can go home, baww! Come to me, Infernal Armor! Combine, baww!”

A second Infernal Armor appeared.

“Kokoru, you don’t have you-know-who?!”

I’d been hoping to see the expensive-to-hire, perfect-for-a-trump-card, wide-ranged destroyer!

“The Deadly King, baww?! No, I don’t! It’s too hard for me to go

that deep into the dungeon again, bawk!”

“I see. Well, we’ll just have to live without him!”

“I’ll buy us time, bawk! Just cover me!”

Fullmetal Kokoru stood before me, staring down the monsters.

“Come at me, bawk!”

All at once, the monsters did just that. To support him, I changed my gear and activated a dark circle.

“Elemental Circle! Draco, stay close to Kokoru!”

This would help Kokoru recover his HP. However, as it drained his MP with each attack of his, if the Infernal Armor ran out of MP, he was done for. In other words, it could *only* buy us time.

We needed another breakthrough. My Final Strike still had three minutes left on its cooldown. Could we make it that long? Even if we did, would one ultimate be enough to get us through this?

To win this, I would have to smack Kokoru’s mother—or at least, the necklace controlling her—with enough damage in only one ultimate. What was its HP? Could I do this with one ult?!

“Bawk, bawk, bawk, baaaaawk!”

Fullmetal Kokoru controlled the Infernal Armor’s fists, showering the enemies in front of him with punches. He was so much more skilled than before; his moves were more agile and frequent. Was Kokoru getting used to the Infernal Armor? Either way, he was doing a fantastic job as a tank right now.

By using too many moves in a row, though, he would blow through his MP bar fast.

“Hey, Kokoru! Instead of going for quantity, go for quality! Hit them with one strong blow to save up MP!”

Ideally, he would only attack each time he took 60 damage to maintain his health with the least number of attacks. But this brawl wasn’t the time for careful calculation; he would just have to watch out for it as best he could.

“Heheh! Don’t worry, Ren; I’ve got this, bawk!”

Kokoru whipped out a yellow bottle that bore a logo with a chicken’s silhouette on the front.

“It’s Vitamin Bawk! The perfect nutritional drink for chickenfolk like us, bawk!”

He popped the top and chugged it down in seconds. Then, his MP started to recover at about a rate of 20-30 per second. I was in awe.

“My family brewed up this product, bawk! That makes it free! In a tough spot like this, I’ll use everything I can, bawk!”

“Woo! Nice job, Kokoru! We ought to be able to make it to my cooldown now!”

“Rich parents are all you need, bawk!”

The Infernal Armor battered foes with even more vigor.

Occasionally, I used my shoulder charge to finish off any near dead enemies. Ever so slowly, I racked up kills. I had to contribute wherever I could, after all.

“Do not think you’ve won yet, baww! Shadow Phoenix!”

Watching from afar, Veld-slash-Kokoru’s mom cast the same spell as before.

“Ugh! That again, baww?!”

Kokoru raised his guard and took the attack. A pillar of flame shot up, engulfing him.

Bwooom!

He was still standing when it faded, but he had lost 60% of his health bar. If he took that much damage while guarding, then that magic was hella strong!

“That smarts, baww! But I can still heal, baww!”

Kokoru tried to loose a flurry of blows on the mob of monsters.

“Nice try, baww! Fall back!”

At Veld’s order, the monsters distanced themselves from Kokoru.

“Grr! Get back over here, baww!”

“I will not let you heal yourself! Now, you die! Shadow Phoenix!”

More of the same magic came our way.

“Baww?!”

“Run, Kokoru! It might fade while you do!”

“Okay, baaaaww!”

Kokoru ran in circles while the Shadow Phoenix tailed him. Now that I was shorthanded, the monsters came at me.

“Oh, I see. Now you wanna come?”

I still had two ways of dealing damage: my dumb shoulder charges and the extra effects of my dark circles. With all the AP I had stocked up, I could also use Windmill, my acrobatic flaming uppercut, several times. It wouldn’t deal damage due to my lack of DEX, but it would let me leap above enemies, evade attacks, and more. This was my key to holding out!

As all the enemies plunged in at once, I used Windmill to dodge upward. The plan was to land next to an enemy with low HP, where I could shoulder-charge them to death!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 81 damage to Demonic Knight!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 60 damage to Demonic Knight!

Ren recovered 60 HP.

Ren has defeated Demonic Knight.

One down! Who's next?!

Just then, I heard Draco's voice.

"Chirp! Ren, something happen!"

My pet dragon was enveloped in a sublime light.

Ooh, he's learning a skill mid-battle! Thank you, Draco!

"C'mere, boy! What's your next skill?!"

I tried to look at the words displayed in the system window, but the monsters wouldn't stop charging at me!

"Rooooar!"

"Grawr!"

"Huh? Ack! Windmill!"

With my jumping art, I leapt above them. Okay, now was my chance! While I was midair, I skimmed over the selections in the system window.

Regenerator (Passive)

Effect: Pet dragon will heal nearby players' HP at regular intervals.

Can be used on all members of master's party.

Heal rate: 5 HP per second.

Baby Breath (In-Battle)

Effect: Baby dragon breathes fire, supporting its master.

Pet will target whatever the player targets.

Pet's master will take all aggro generated by this skill.

Grow Up (In-Battle)

Effect: Consumes master's AP to grow temporarily.

After growing, pet dragon will be treated as an NPC that attacks enemies based on master's orders.

Reverts to baby dragon upon being defeated by an enemy attack.

AP Cost: 200

Effect Duration: 900 seconds

Pickup 2 (Passive)

Effect: Occasionally gathers materials when a material-gathering point is nearby. (Tools not necessary)

Functions even when master is logged out.

Able to find higher-quality materials than normal

Pickup, and collects at a higher frequency.

Oh? What's this?

"I will not allow it, bawk!"

Kokoru's mother's eyes started to glow. A ray of light shot from them and came my way. It was aimed right where I would land. With the speed of the ray, all I could do was guard!

"Argh!"

Dark Lord Veld activated Eye Beam.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 307 damage.

Ouch, that hurt!

On top of that, the attack had made quite an impact. I was knocked back from where I stood and into the crowd of monsters. This was just what he wanted.

In no time at all, I was being attacked from all directions. I couldn't evade them now. Even if I tried to Windmill, they would hit me during the wind-up animation, so I could only guard.

With the proper guard motion, I could fully protect myself against attacks in front of me. As a man with such high VIT, my guards were super tough, but they wouldn't work on attacks from behind.

That might sound obvious, since I couldn't guard my back. But to be clear, this wasn't one of those easy games where just pressing the guard button would guard you from attacks in all directions. You had to make the actual guarding motions on the VR platform, then fully block the attack. After that, guard break and the like would be determined.

Meanwhile, depending on the differences between fighters' stats, evasion could nullify an attack entirely despite the animation hitting you. With that difference in stats, one could just attack endlessly and still evade every hit. Evasion had the advantage when it came to mindless fighting. As such, everyone apart from tanks tended to prefer evasion over guarding.

Anyway, as I was now, I would guard everything in front of me but take tons of hits from the rear. In which case... it was time to use this!

"Tortoise Guard!"

This was one of my striking arts, and a defensive one at that, though I hardly ever used it.

Tortoise Guard (AP: 125)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> While active, renders user immobile but

greatly reduces physical damage sustained.
Effect duration: 30 seconds.

It used up AP, but now wasn't the time to worry about that! This would reduce incoming damage so much that I didn't have to bother guarding every attack.

Demonic Knight attacked.
Dealt 3 damage to Ren!
Demonic Knight attacked.
Dealt 4 damage to Ren!
Deathly Fighter attacked.
Dealt 5 damage to Ren!
Deathly Fighter attacked.
Dealt 2 damage to Ren!
Fencing Lizard attacked.
Dealt 6 damage to Ren!
Fencing Lizard attacked.
Dealt 4 damage to Ren!

Despite not guarding, every enemy attack dealt mere single-digit damage. I was already tanky, and now I had Tortoise Guard! The only problem was that I couldn't move. With the thirty seconds it granted me, I would choose Draco's new skill.

Regenerator wouldn't work; I brought my HP down to one on purpose, so that would mess with my plans. Baby Breath would help with attacking. I certainly wouldn't mind a guaranteed boost on one of my worst problems.

Grow Up was in the same category, but instead, it made Draco temporarily become a normal NPC like Kokoru. Draco was special as he was now; enemies wouldn't attack him. By growing up, he would lose that distinction, taking aggro and having a health bar.

That was risky. If a grown-up Draco was defeated and needed time to revive, then I wouldn't be able to use his Target Marker to move my circles. In fact, the sheer act of growing bigger might disable Target Marker.

I'd have to test little things like that on my own. After all, in-game descriptions were always vague. They would be way too long if they included every little detail, and they would kill the fun of testing and finding hidden effects on one's own. For these reasons, I didn't especially mind it.

In short, Grow Up seemed good enough but could potentially come with major drawbacks.

Finally, we had Pickup 2, which was simply a better version of

Pickup. As my level increased, the materials of my weapons would become more expensive. Considering I burned through a weapon every time I used an ultimate, this could be a huge boon.

Would it pick up better items? That would decrease the time I spent farming. Heck, maybe he would outright bring me stuff like damascus swords, which I could use to make my Caneswords. Material costs were seriously high. Decreasing the running cost of my strategy even a little would give me a lot more breathing room.

Of the selection, the one I wanted most was Pickup 2. Normally, I probably would've chosen that. However, there was a time and a place for all things. Part of maturing was learning to make comprehensive decisions. You had to look at each situation from multiple angles.

I was in the midst of enemies and protecting myself with Tortoise Guard, sure, but that also meant that I couldn't move at all. Once my thirty seconds were up, it was obvious that I'd get the tar beaten out of me. In this situation, I had to call for help.

Draco, once transformed into a real NPC, would jump in and save my life! To be honest, it was my second-favorite choice, anyway. I could get Pickup 2 next time!

"I choose Grow Up! Draco, Grow Up and help me out!"

"Chichirp! I'm gonna grooow!"

Draco started to glow with dazzling light!

Chapter 5: Home Makeover—a Den of Monsters! Part 2

“Whooooa!”

All eyes in the room, including those of the monsters, were drawn to the light. Draco was enveloped in an incredible, sparkling aura.

In the light, Draco’s form—only visible as a silhouette—began to grow and grow! He grew to my height—no, even larger! He was around six and a half feet tall now.

That was still small for a dragon, but compared to the little guy who could perch on my shoulder and chirped all over the place, it was unbelievable growth.

“Yeeehaaaaaaaaw!”

The first thing to come out of big Draco’s mouth was a hearty yell. That wasn’t his normal voice. He now sounded more like a middle school student.

“I’m all full o’ new power, I am! Hoo-wee, this feels darn good! My time has come, pardner!”

Uh, what? Something about this feels totally off.

“G’day to you, Master Ren! I reckon I’ve always wanted a real chat with ya like this!”

“Huh? You *are* Draco, right?”

“Yes, sirree! The one ‘n’ only! I done gone and embiggened myself for ya, Ren!”

He sounded excited, but I was just flabbergasted. Draco’s language skills seemed a little bit... off. It was like he’d acquired a mishmash of the most extreme American stereotypes, to the point where he sounded even wilder than Emily.

“Why are you talking like that?”

“Since yer so bad at English, I reckoned I might as well learn how natives speak it so I could learn ya!”

“Oh. I see.”

So he’s trying to make up for my weaknesses? Draco’s growing up to be a real partner to me. But... is this how he’ll really grow up to be? I know this is temporary, but will he end up this way forever and ever?

Well, now wasn’t the time to worry about that. I had to focus on the enemy. The way he talked bothered me, but he at least should’ve been stronger!

“Draco, I need your help! Take down these bad guys for me!”

“I gotcha, cowboy! Watch me strike down these here baddies for ya! Haaaaah!”

Draco wound up, swinging his arm above one of the monsters crowding around me. There was a glint in his eye, as if pure malice shot through him.

“F**K YOOOU!”

Draco’s sharp claws tore through one of the Demonic Knights, slaying it.

Whoa! What on earth?!

“F**k! F**k! F**k yooou!”

He was a great attacker, no doubt. His offensive power was through the roof.

But where did he learn such a naughty word?! Even I know that one!

“All right, you li’l f***ing s***heads! Go on ’n’ skedaddle away from my pardner here!”

To be fair, I did wonder what Draco would be like when he grew up. But this... this was all wrong! It was beyond imagination!

“Yeeehaaaw! Weak, weak! Y’all belong in the trash! Anyone who wants to hurt my pardner here is a real piece of s**t! Only way t’get rid of trash is to burn it! F**k all y’all!”

Big Draco laughed and laughed, spitting hot fire all over the place. His crimson flames were even stronger than the Giga-Gargoyle’s.

“Whoa, buddy!”

I had to worry about the damage to the mansion. It was fire, after all.

“Bawk! Don’t burn my house down, bawk! There’s a time and a place, little guy!” Kokoru protested, continuing to flee the Shadow Phoenix.

“Hmph!” Draco snorted, easily blowing away the Shadow Phoenix that pursued our feathered friend.



“Baww! Wow, it’s gone! Good job, Draco!”

“Let me tell ya now, li’l guy: I only listen to my pardner Ren here. I’ll f**k ya right up if ya ain’t careful, feel me? Yer gonna be a nice li’l meal for me, buddy.”

“Baww?! When did you get so mean, baww?! Were you actually trying to eat me all this time?!”

“Mmm, yer a tasty-lookin’ chicken, you are. *Shlurp...*”

“Baaaww?!”

“Hey, you’re kidding, right? Don’t eat him, seriously.”

“If’n ya say so, Ren.”

So, he’ll always obey me? Well, he is my pet dragon, I guess.

I loved that he was strong and all, and thanks to him, we’d really made a comeback in this fight. However, I wasn’t sure I could take him home if he was going to cuss this much.

Our guild was mostly girls, and they’d be disgusted to hear this vocabulary. Naturally, they would blame me because I’d raised him! If they knew that our adorable Draco was like this, then even when he returned to normal, they would never cuddle him and love him the same way again.

I couldn’t bear the thought. I felt awful for Draco. This was something I was better off not letting the girls see. Maybe I could fix Draco by being a better man from now on. If the girls saw him as he was now, their impression of him could possibly be set in stone forever.

That settled it. Once we made it through this, I would keep adult Draco sealed away whenever any of them were around. Until he was presentable, I would experiment with him in secret and figure out how to improve his personality.

He’d said he was like this because I was bad at English, so maybe I needed to put my back into studying. Then, maybe he would at least stop with the f-word.

*Okay! It’s decided. This’ll be the final battle of Draco: F**k Edition. Might as well get him to let it all out now!*

“Anyway, let’s focus. Stop scaring Kokoru and help us fight!”

“Loud and clear, pardner. Y’all want me to eat that big chicken over there?”

“Whoa, hold on! Kokoru’s mom is under the enemy’s control, okay? We need to break the necklace hanging from her neck or find some way to destroy it!”

“Okey dokey! Sit yerself on down, Ren. I’ll take care of this varmint,” Draco announced as he approached our foe.

“Baww! Shadow Phoenix!”

“Cute li’l bug ya got there!”

No sooner did the phoenix appear than Draco smacked it to the ground and stomped on it. The phoenix dissipated, leaving not even a trace.

He just ground that thing into the dust after it gave Kokoru so much trouble. Draco sure is a strong boy now! Does he have a resistance to fire or are his stats just way higher?

Either way, the situation had been turned on its head.

“Bahahawk. I suppose it was too much to ask for a phoenix to burn a dragon, bawk.”

“Y’got that right, pardner. Y’all ain’t nothin’ but a birdbrain, I tell you what! How ’bout some o’ this?!”

Draco swung a thick arm down on Kokoru’s possessed mom. Veld-Mom dodged to the side, but Draco was faster. He twisted and caught the enemy with his tail, which coiled tightly around Kokoru’s mom’s body.

“Keep it up!” I shouted.

“Let’s take a gander at that necklace o’ yours, feller!”

Draco squeezed the necklace in his hand.

“Now rip it off!”

“Gotcha, pardner!”

Yes! We’ve got this!

However, my celebration was a bit premature.

With a loud *shwoomp*, the black aura moved from Kokoru’s mother to Draco and swallowed him up.

Huh?! Uh, I have a bad feeling about this.

“Heh... Mwahaha. Now this is good. Stronger *and* easier to control than that birdbrain. Thank you for so graciously providing me with a new host.” Draco smirked down at us.

No way. Did Dark Lord Veld move from Kokoru’s mom to Draco?! He’s talking normally now too! Being turned evil by the bad guy made Draco normal! What the heck?!

“Bwahaha! What a splendid host. Not only is he much easier to handle, but he’s considerably tough. Conquering this land and being feared as the terrifying Fell Dragon doesn’t sound so bad, now, does it?! As I am now, it will be a paltry task!”

The possessed Draco let out a mighty roar.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Pfft...”

He just called himself the terrifying Fell Dragon, but Draco was way more terrifying before! Why, he was so bad that I wouldn’t be surprised if the girls started thinking less of me because of it.

Dark Lord Veld’s Draco was much more like an evil dragon, so it was a bit easier to stomach. He might have looked strong, but all I had to do was take him down! Then I wouldn’t have to worry about Akira and the girls looking down on me or being disgusted when they saw

him.

In a way, this was much better. I could save Draco by bringing him back to his pet form and then sealing away Grow Up forever!

I didn't see a thing! As far as I'm concerned, Draco never even learned a skill!

Veld had no clue what I was thinking, though, so he thought I was laughing at him.

“What is so funny to you?!”

His temper flaring, Veld-Draco slammed his thick tail on the ground.

Aww, he's mad.

“Nothing, man, sorry. I'm just glad you're more normal than the real Draco!”

“Hahaha... I get it, baww. Draco grew up to be real weird, didn't he? He's about as scary as Nozomi's big brother, baww. I don't think you wanna let Akira and the girls see him like that, baww.”

“Yeah, bro. Imagine what they'll think of me!”

“Oof, baww.”

“Let's save Draco, make him a kid again, and never let Grow Up see the light of day. We saw nothing, right, Kokoru?”

“Agreed, baww!”

Kokoru and I exchanged nods. Meanwhile, Dark Lord Veld's rage had not subsided.

“What foolish talk is this?! How dare you! I planned to just abandon this birdbrain now that I'm finished with her, but I've changed my mind! How does *this* make you feel, hm?!”

Veld-Draco lifted a leg, ready to kick Kokoru's unconscious mother as she lay on the ground.

“Momma! I won't let him hurt you, baww!”

Kokoru leapt into action, standing in the way to shield his mother just before the kick could land.

“Bagaaaww?! ”

Upon impact, he was launched into a wall with incredible speed. His HP went way down, bringing him close to death. It was nice that he hadn't died in one hit, at least, but Veld was currently possessing a powerful vessel.

From what little I had seen of him fighting, it was clear that Draco himself was tough. He had crushed a bunch of reasonably strong monsters like it was child's play, hurling obscenities at them all the while.

I ran over to Kokoru's mother and helped her up. “Good job, bud! Your mom's safe now!”

I'd better move her to a safe corner of the room.

Kokoru was on the same page. “Take her somewhere safe, baww!

I'll keep this guy away from her, baww!"

"Yes, sir!"

My response prompted Kokoru to begin summoning his next monster.

"Cleric Bunny, come to me!"

What he summoned looked like a recolored Island Bunny, but it was much more useful. As its name implied, the Cleric Bunny knew healing magic. Right after it appeared, it worked on replenishing Kokoru's HP.

"I'll have this one heal me so I can hold out, baww!"

Kokoru's idea was to act as a punching bag while his monster healed him from behind, but that wouldn't be so easy.

"You think you're so clever!" Veld-Draco shouted.

He then opened his maw and spat out an enormous fireball, which flew straight at the Cleric Bunny.

Shwoooooom!

A pillar of flames erupted from where it landed. By the time it was gone, the Cleric Bunny had also disappeared without a trace.

"Baww?! That was fast! Pretty rude of you to attack a healer, baww!"

"Hmph! Silence, worm!"

Well, it was obvious he'd do that based on our aggro levels right now.

The Cleric Bunny took priority because it had healing aggro.

The Fell Dragon approached Kokoru, wound up his body, then swung his tail at the Birdman with great force.

"Baaaww?!"

Kokoru was sent flying once more, this time landing in front of us. His HP returned to almost zero.

"Kokoru, are you okay?!"

"I-I'm not, baww. I feel like I'm dying, baaaww!"

"Okay, tag me in! You fall back. Do you have any other healers?"

"I don't have any more Cleric Bunnies, baww! Things are looking pretty bawkin' bleak right about now..."

"Hmm. Well, we've only got one choice. I'll sock him a good one."

"Your ultimate, baww? But can you do it, baww?"

"I dunno; I don't have the slightest idea of his HP. I can estimate based on damage and how far down his bar goes, but we haven't even done that yet."

In that case, I had to go for maximum damage output. If *that* took him down, I could ask for nothing better!

It was time to use the Peregrine Stone Homura had traded me for my info on the Death Chariot gear! To be honest, I had been planning

to use it against the Hadean Rose, but plans tend to change. If I could make use of it here, then I wouldn't hesitate for a second!

I had forged the Peregrine Stone into my damascus sword to make a Peregrine Damascus Sword, a weapon that would strike twice. My plan was to craft that into a damascus cane by placing the Peregrine Damascus Sword inside of it. With this Canesword, any ultimate I let off would double in damage.

It was the ultimate Canesword, perfect for a trump card. Unfortunately, it had the OEX designation. As a reminder, O meant I could only carry one, and EX meant I couldn't give it to other people. Once I crafted it, I couldn't do anything fancy like keeping it in store while I used others to attack. As soon as it was made real, it would be destroyed with my next attack.

Right now, the Peregrine Damascus Sword was sitting pretty in my inventory.

It's fine! I'll just use it here and now!

"Bawk, is this gonna work? We only get one chance at this, don't we, bawk?"

"Yeah. We don't have time to feel around for a new strategy."

The dark, grown-up Draco was right in front of us, and he had murder in his eyes. I would usually try to buy time to find a breakthrough at this point, most likely by using Enervating Circle to run around and slow the enemy down.

In order to do that, however, I would need the circle to move along with me—only doable by little Draco with his Target Marker skill. As long as he was being possessed, that wouldn't work.

Kinda crazy how so many of my tactics rely on Draco, but what can you do?

"No, bawk! This isn't like you, Ren! You're supposed to look like you're going crazy but still think about every action! I've gotta find another way, bawk."

"Bro, you've taken too much damage!"

"Bawk, but—"

"Ren's right, bawk. You need to rest."

That voice wasn't mine or Kokoru's; it was his mom's.

Did she wake up?

"Momma! Are you okay, bawk?!"

"Yes, my boy. I'm sorry for all this trouble, bawk. As an apology, I'll do something to help you boys out, bawk."

Kokoru's mom stood in front of us.

"Huh?! Hey, it's too dangerous!" I cried.

Even so, she seemed perfectly composed in the face of danger.

"It's okay. Before we got married and Kokoru was born, I was his father's bodyguard, bawk."

“Bawk, yeah! He did say you used to be super strong, bawk. Not just the strongest of the chickenfolk, but the strongest of all Birdmen!”

“For real?!”

“All this time, I thought he was exaggerating, bawk!”

“Heehee. I like to think I’m still as good as I used to be, bawk.

Ren, I’ll try to give you an opening. Watch this, bawk.”

Really? Can she handle this?!

But, well, all we really needed her to do was deal a little bit of damage. That would let me get a rough guess of the enemy’s HP, which would be a huge help.

“B-But, uhh...”

I was really afraid of her getting trounced like that poor Cleric Bunny.

Wait, what would happen if Kokoru’s mom got killed mid-quest? Would she revive?! Or would the event branch off and leave her dead?! I’d never be able to sleep at night! What’s a boy to do?!

“Don’t worry about me. Baaaawk!”

Kokoru’s mom let out a yell, and she was enveloped by a gold-colored aura! It was as if her entire body had turned golden.

Boooooom!

The potent energy she was emanating caused the entire mansion to quake.

“Oooh!”

What the heck? That was awesome! That round, little body is hella intimidating!

“Observe me and come up with a strategy, bawk.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Her sheer intensity made me agree without thinking. I couldn’t see her level or her HP, but she definitely seemed strong.

“Hmph! An empty bluff. You die now!”

Dark Lord Veld prepared to activate Blazing Bomb!

Nooo! That’s the thing that killed the Cleric Bunny!

“Watch out, Momma!”

“Just keep your eyes on me, bawk. I’m fine.”

Kokoru’s mother remained unmoved. Her short, chubby body looked kind of funny, but she walked and talked like a confident, high-class woman.

Shwoooooom!

A fireball struck her and created a giant pillar of flame. She disappeared inside the bright-red pillar.

“Whoa, it hit her!”

“Oh no, baw! Mommaaa!” Kokoru cried.

“Heehee. Quiet down, now, Kokoru. You wouldn’t want to scare Ren.”

Her calm voice reached us from within the conflagration. After the fire faded, Kokoru’s mother was still standing there, unharmed and shining brightly.

“Holy baw! You’re safe!”

“Keep a cool head and fire won’t be able to burn you. Your feeble fire won’t work on me!”

What?! That didn’t make any sense!

For a moment, I was speechless. Then I remembered our earlier scuffle with Dark Lord Veld.

When he switched from Kokoru’s mom to Draco, didn’t he say that Draco was easier to control? That he could draw more strength out of him?

I’d taken it to mean that Kokoru’s mother was weak, but maybe it could be taken another way. Kokoru’s mother was so strong that he wasn’t able to control her well. Veld had been bawking away while he possessed her, but when he moved to Draco, he wasn’t throwing f-bombs all over the place.

Basically, his power was lacking in some ways. Maybe we really could let her handle it!

Kokoru’s mother approached Veld with her race’s trademark tottering steps.

“How *dare* you!”

“I should be saying the same thing, baw. You won’t get away with this, not for a second, baw.”

When she reached point-blank range, she readied her fighting stance. It didn’t exactly look cool or powerful—what with her arms and legs being so short—but it was still oddly intimidating.

“Diiiie!”

Just then, Veld-Draco’s giant claws came down on her!

“Nice try, baw!”

Bshhhh!

“She blocked it, baw!” Kokoru marveled.

“Whoa!”

Dark Lord Veld attacked.

But Mommaru guarded the attack!

Whoa, she guarded it perfectly! Wait, they seriously named her Mommaru?!

It didn't end there. After blocking the blow, she shoved Draco's arm off to the side and forcefully broke his posture.

"Ngh!"

"Now, bawk!"

There was a glint in Mommaru's eye. She stepped in so close that she was almost touching the enemy. Then, she aimed some round part of her back or shoulder—I wasn't sure which—at the enemy and charged.

Pow!

Her body slam struck a clean hit on him. Veld-Draco's massive form was bent at a forty-five degree angle as he was blown backward.

"Gaaargh?!"

CRASH!

He smashed into the wall, breaking a hole in it. Her terrifyingly powerful body slam had tossed that giant dragon so far away.

"Ooh! Great job, bawk!"

"Wow, I was right!"

Mommaru was too strong for Veld to control!

Mommaru activated Tie Shan Kao.

Dealt 6,888 damage to Dark Lord Veld!

What insane power! She didn't even have to throw her money away to deal that much damage!

"Unngh..." Veld-Draco groaned, lodged in the wall.

He was immobilized from taking so much damage, so I wondered if her attack had a temporary stun effect.

"I thought I would never have to use my fists again after I got married, bawk. But a martial artist's blood naturally attracts battle, bawk..."

Mommaru murmured something that I didn't quite understand, but sounded deep nonetheless.

Seriously, though! Holy crap! Tie Shan Kao, huh? That's a really popular move in fighting games. So that's in this game too? That must mean it's a striking art, right?! Could I learn it as an art or an ultimate?!

The Deadly King, strongest and fanciest of the undead, had a Crimson Calamity skill book. I was dying to know if Mommaru had something like that for Tie Shan Kao.

If she went down, would she drop it?! Well, I don't have it in me to hurt her, but... man, I want to learn it! I wanna see that combo'd with the

drama cannon! Is there a way to make this new dream of mine a reality?!

“What do you think, Ren?” Mommaru asked me. “Did that help?”

“Yeah, um, let’s see!”

I took a look at Veld’s HP bar. It had fallen by about 40%, which probably meant that he had around 10,000 HP or less remaining. Was that within range of being defeated with a Peregrine Stone-infused ultimate? This boss didn’t spew out seeds like the Hadean Rose, so he was way easier to deal with.

“I’m a little sore. It’s been so long since I used my full power, bawk. Can I leave the rest to you, bawk?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Now it was my turn! I quickly crafted the Peregrine Damascus Sword into a Canesword.

“Give my boy Draco back! The cute little one, that is!”

I readied myself to activate Vermilion Wing. Actually, the two strikes made Dead End into Dead End V, so Vermilion Wing would be... Vermilion Twin Wings!

Behold! My strongest ultimate yet!

“Take this! Vermilion Twin Wings!”

You don’t have enough AP, so the ultimate didn’t activate!

Huh?! Why’d I get this?!

Vermilion Wing was made up of Turnover, Explosive Tackle, and Quickdraw. Of the three, Turnover was a simple HP-MP swapping skill. It didn’t require AP to use. Quickdraw had an AP cost of 0. As a striking technique, Explosive Tackle cost 75 AP.

Vermilion Wing itself ought to cost 75 AP. I thought I had a decent amount of AP from our battle before, though?

I took a look and found that my AP was only at 20.

Huh? Shouldn’t I have more? Gah, it’s going down again! Now I only have 10 AP!

“What the heck?!”

Ugh, never mind that! I really need to finish off Veld!

Whether Vermilion Twin Wings would work or not, I could still use Dead End V. It didn’t require any AP at all!

I ran up, closing the distance between us. Vermilion Twin Wings came with a lot of forward motion, so I had attempted to use it from afar. Throughout all this, however, he would not stand there and wait for me.

“Graaah! Damn you! How could such a fat little chicken harbor this power?!”

He stood up, destroying the walls around him. His bloodshot eyes

were fixed on Mommaru.

“Judging others’ strength is part of what it means to be strong yourself, baww. You’re just a little weak in that regard, baww.”

So am I! Sorry!

Regardless, I was here to put an end to things. It was time to deal the final blow before he could heal himself.

“You’re up against *me*, buddy! Hand over my son’s body and never come back!”

“Hmph! I know your moves from when I fought you as Froi! I shall retreat from the range of your ultimate attack and recover my strength!”

Veld-Draco spread his wings wide. What a coward. I couldn’t let him run; if he healed, I wouldn’t be able to OHKO him with my ult. It was only because Mommaru clocked him that I could finish him off with just one.

I watched as his massive form soared into the air. Just when all seemed lost, a system message popped up.

You don’t have enough AP, so the dragon cannot keep up its growth state.

Grow Up will now be canceled.

“Bwugh?!” he blurted.

At that moment, Veld-Draco’s body began to glow and shrink. The necklace around his neck fell off, and both my adorable little boy and the necklace fell to the floor.

“He’s back!” I yelled with delight.

Now I see what happened!

“It all makes sense! Even when he was controlled, I was still using Grow Up!”

Grow Up cost 200 AP when it was activated, and it also required a stream of AP over time to maintain the growth state. The reason I couldn’t use Vermilion Twin Wings was because my AP had been sapped by Grow Up when I wasn’t looking!

While Grow Up’s description mentioned the 200 AP cost and the 900 second duration, it didn’t include the part about its continuous AP cost. If I couldn’t keep supplying AP, its effect would run out early.

Okay, then. If I wanted to keep up his transformation the whole time, I would need to build up AP fast. Grown-up Draco may have been a foul-mouthed monster, but he was *really* strong. I could see why they added that limitation.

Also, based on my skill list, Grow Up’s cooldown was one hour. It was like fifteen minutes of free rein once per hour, as long as you could maintain it. Convenient, but not overpowered.

Well, I don't mind sealing this away at all! If it's too overpowered, I'll start wanting to rely on that little potty mouth!

Anyway, with my AP drained, Grow Up had been removed. Now that Draco was so much smaller, the necklace had fallen right off of him.

"Whoa, so I don't need to use my ult! Aww man, I already used my Peregrine Damascus Sword too!"

I couldn't make another Canesword without using an ult, but it would be a waste to use it against small-fry monsters! What was I supposed to do?

Kokoru let out a laugh. "Hahaha. I'm just glad we wrapped this up, bawk. Draco looks safe too, bawk."

"Yeah, true."

"Chirp?"

Having come to his senses, my Draco was back to his cute pet dragon status, looking around in a daze.

"Draco, c'mere! Come on, boy!"

"Chirp! Ren!"

"Good boy. I like you better this way."

"Agreed, bawk. If it keeps you from turning into *that*, I don't mind a nibble on the head once in a while."

"Let's keep big Draco a secret from Akira and the others. That goes for Grow Up in general. It never happened, capisce? If they catch wind of it, they'll want to see it. And if they see it, I'm done for."

"You don't have to tell me twice, bawk. Those girls would hate it."

"Yeah. I'm glad we agree on this."

At that moment, Kokoru's mom called out, "Hey, you two. This isn't over yet. That black crystal thing still needs to get crushed, bawk." She pointed to the pendant.

"You're right," I agreed. "Okay, I've got this! This is gonna be real overkill, so watch! Dead End V!"

Craaaaash!

My blade glowed with purple light, tracing the shape of a V! In a flash, my two sorrowful strikes reached the dark crystal. The full-power—and frankly wasteful—Dead End V smashed the pendant to smithereens.

Woo, go me! That's what you get for making me waste my stone!

"Graaaagh!"

A faint cry could be heard as the black sparkles fell through the air like rain and disappeared.

“I’m still not sure if there was any point in using my Peregrine Stone, but at least it’s over, I guess.”

That was the worst possible timing! I thought the situation was perfect for me to use the stone to finish things off. How could I have predicted that my AP loss would remove Draco’s Grow Up?!

There’s no use crying over spilled milk, sure—but I was ready to cry my eyes out. What a waste!

“I don’t think we’ll have to worry anymore, boys. Thank you for your help, bawwk. I for one am shocked that I let that thing control me! I’m too used to being a housewife, bawwk.”

“I’m so glad you’re back, Momma! It’s all thanks to Ren, bawwk! Thank you!”

“Oh, no way. I’m kinda off my game here, heh. All I did was run out of AP.”

Maybe I was a godlike gamer just for... bringing a good target for Dark Lord Veld to possess? Grown-up Draco really was spectacular, but I would still refuse to use him until we could fix his potty mouth.

“We’re always relying on you, Ren. Besides, we haven’t even properly thanked you for raising our boy to be so strong, bawwk. We have to do *something* for you, bawwk.”

“Good idea, bawwk!”

“Aww, I couldn’t possibly—pssh, never mind! I’d be happy to accept! If possible, there’s something I really, really want!”

I needed it! If it were anything else, I would be modest, just as a polite boy should. But I wanted it so badly that I couldn’t help but latch on.

“Is there now? Anything, just say the word, bawwk.”

“It’s gotta be cash, bawwk! Ren’s always throwing away money when he fights. He’ll take what he can get, bawwk!”

“You’re not wrong, but that’s not what I’m after this time! Mommaru, can you teach me how to use that Tie Shan Kao you used before?! Is there like a skill book, or a secret manual, or what?!”

I loved how strong it was. It might have just been a result of Mommaru’s high stats, but it was still clearly a step above the striking arts I knew. If I could put that into my ultimates, that would add another drama cannon to the list!

Akira and the others might win with a different strategy, but this could be the final piece of the puzzle to defeating the Hadean Rose! Once I saw that, I couldn’t get my mind off of it. I wanted it, I wanted it, I *needed* it!

“Aah, bawwk. I, um...”

“Please, please, please! I’m begging you!”

I immediately prostrated myself on the floor. I was willing to do anything to raise the firepower of my drama cannon.

“Oh, Ren, don’t do that. Yes, bawk, it is a technique I try to avoid showing off. But since Kokoru can’t use it, I was wondering what I should do with it, bawk.”

“Heh. I can’t attack enemies in the first place, bawk.”

That was because of his Cowardice trait. No matter what he did, this curse kept him from being able to deal damage to enemies. Even if Kokoru himself couldn’t fight, he could use monsters he hired to fight indirectly.

“Perhaps, bawk, I should let you have it. After all, you succeeded where I failed at making Kokoru a formidable fighter, bawk.”

“Yeah, bawk! I know Ren can put it to good use, bawk!”

“Wow, really?! Thank you so much!”

So there *was* some sort of skill book for this! I was glad I insisted on it. What a fantastic limited quest! In fact, I was glad I picked Kokoru for the competitive guild mission!

“Here is the secret manual for Tie Shan Kao, bawk. It’s all yours.”

Mommaru gave me a scroll that seemed to break down the motions.

Ren obtained the secret manual for Tie Shan Kao!

Ren can now use the striking art Tie Shan Kao

(temp) !

YEEEEAH! I learned it! Finally, my time has come! What’s the deal with this (temp) thing, though?

“But be careful, bawk. When you’re not used to it, you’ll easily get hurt. You just have to keep practicing, bawk.”

“I see.”

So basically, this is more like a provisional license than the real thing? Once I use it enough, the (temp) will come off and I’ll unlock its true power.

Let’s see how it looks now.

Tie Shan Kao (temp) (AP: 200)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> A tackle that uses the back. Leaves the user with 1 HP after use. Extremely powerful. Only usable once per battle. As you haven’t quite made it yours yet, it puts great strain on the body.

“Leaves the user with 1 HP?! Huh, I guess that’s where getting used to it comes in.”

“Whoa. Using it almost kills you, huh, bawk?”

“Yes, until you get used to it, bawk. It’ll be difficult, but once

you've trained enough, you can make it your own technique."

Kokoru and Mommaru were supportive, but I didn't even care!

"What an incredible effect! This is awesome! Fantastic!"

"Bawk? What's up, Ren?"

"This means I won't have to use big circles to sap my MP and use Turnover anymore! Without using Turnover, I can just use Tie Shan Kao to fix my HP! Now I can put damage arts in all three Skill Chain slots! My ultimates will be mightier than anyone has ever seen! Ahaha... Bwahahaha!"

"Ren? Does that drawback actually benefit you in some way, bawk?"

One of the most scrumptious parts of redefining the meta was when you could multiply two negatives to make a positive! This was the very manifestation of the true charms of playing bad classes! It really sucked that I would lose my HP reduction once the (temp) was gone, but I was going to wring it for every last drop of damage!

"Yes, ma'am! I gotta go try this out right away! Thanks again, for real!"

It was time for experimentation, but with the least possible number of uses so I could keep my (temp).

With that, I sprinted right out of Kokoru's family's mansion.

Chapter 6: The Cannon's Counterattack

“Phew. That was some good testing!”

After I finished experimenting with the skill that Kokoru's mom, Mommaru—or should I say, Master Mommaru—had given me, I returned to the cottage in Summertide feeling fully satisfied. I had forgotten all of the melancholy that was in me when I first left, and now I was in a wonderful mood. I was coming back stronger than ever!

The testing didn't take very long. Actually, I didn't have room to do it for long. If I used Tie Shan Kao (temp) too much, I could lose out on its HP-reduction effect. That would make me weaker overall. Normally, I would've wanted to experiment with it in every which way, but I had to keep the number of times I used it to a minimum.

Now, were Akira and the others back yet?

“I'm home!”

When I entered the living room, everyone was already there. They looked tired and sluggish.

“Oh, hi Ren.”

“Hey! Good work out there, everyone! How'd it go? Did you take down the Hadean Rose?”

That was the wall that stopped not only us, but every single party that wanted to make it to the end of Aswarth's Undersea Ruins. Regardless of whether it was attacked or left alone, it would summon additional monsters. If any of its adds damaged players, it recovered HP to match. What a diabolical boss.

In a time-limited dungeon like Aswarth's, these traits made it much harder to defeat. Overall, I would say that it was the strongest of all the bosses we had encountered in this game so far.

The gang had used the Super Special Warp Stone that Shizuku gave them, allowing them to enter the dungeon with a two-hour time limit. The plan, then, had been to try to kill off the little flowers until the Hadean Rose ran out of seeds to spray. This strategy was based on the idea that since it shot so many of them out so fast, it ought to have a limited number of seeds.

Akira hunched over, dejected. “Sorry... We couldn't do it.”

“Gah! Really?!”

“Yeah, really! We tried so hard to kill off every single Black Rose,

but it just never ended.”

“The run was just fine until that point,” Akabane chimed in with a sigh. “We arrived at the Hadean Rose’s doorstep with an hour and forty-five minutes remaining, yet its summoning showed no sign of stopping.”

“We’re sorry, Takashiro. We believe that there may be no limit to the number of Black Roses it can create.”

“Yeah, it totally had unlimited seeds in it!”

Maeda and Yano might be right. Hmm... Maybe there’s some condition that’ll stop it from spawning extras?

“Perhaps defeating even more of them would have put an end to their spawning, but let me assure you that we went as fast as we could. Everyone here did their best,” Shizuku told me.

“Yeah, bro. We went hard for two hours straight! That’s the most exercise I’ve done in months.”

Shizuku didn’t let her fatigue show, but Kataoka was dead. *She’s a tough one for sure.* Whereas everyone else was clearly exhausted, she alone looked composed.

At the very least, we’d gained one useful piece of information: just killing the flowers alone wouldn’t make them stop appearing. With more experience like this, we could develop a concrete battle plan.

Would I put everyone’s efforts to waste? Well, yes! I had a completely different plan in mind now.

“I see, I see. Hah! What a thorn in our side, huh?”

Akira gave me a suspicious look. “Uh, why are you so happy about it?”

“Well, I figured something like this might happen, so I’ve devised a new method! I’m getting excited just knowing that it’ll see the light of day!”

“Huh?! You still have tricks up your sleeve?! I thought the Super Spatial Warp Stone was our big trump card.”

“I thought so too,” added Akabane. “Did you not send us off with that forlorn look on your face, believing us to be your last hope?”

“That was the me of a few hours ago! As a gamer, I can progress with leaps and bounds in a mere few hours!”

Especially when limited quests give out juicy arts as rewards! That really was the perfect quest for today.

“Did something happen while we were gone?” Akira asked.

“Yep. A little quest came up, I went to Kokoru’s house, and I powered up like never before!”

“Chirp! I got big and strong! Biiig!”

Gah, you little...! I shut Kokoru up, but I didn’t think Draco would say it himself.

“Huh?! Draco, can you get bigger? Ooh, I know! You must’ve

learned that Grow Up skill from before. Hey, what's it like? I wanna see!"

Ugh, I knew it would turn out like this! No way am I gonna show them. It's time for a cover-up!

It was my decision to keep the girls from seeing it, and I was gonna see it through.

"No, no, no! He doesn't know what he's talking about. He just got bigger for a sec as part of a special event. See, he doesn't even remember it!"

"Hmm. You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure!"

"Okay then. Does that mean you got some other power-up?"

"Absolutely! Thanks to Master Mommaru, my ultimates are about to be reborn."

"Who's Master Mommaru?"

"She's Kokoru's mom. You should've seen her! She taught me this crazy strong skill, and now I can fight the Hadean Rose. So let's go off to Aswarth's again! Heheheh... This time, we're out for blood! Witness the power of my true awakening!"

"Huh?! We're going again?!"

"I am rather tired, so..." Akabane trailed off.

Maeda nodded. "Likewise. I could use a little break..."

"Unlike you, Takashiro, we worked our butts off!" Yano yelled.

"Yeah, I know. I still need time to prepare too. I gotta go look around, so you all can rest here. See you soon!"

As I tried to leave, Akira stopped me.

"Wait up, Ren. I'm gonna come with you!"

"Don't you wanna take a break?"

"Nope. I know how hyper you can get. Who knows what you'll get up to if I don't watch you?"

"I think I'll be fine, but sure. Let's ride!"

With that, Akira and I left the floating cottage. At the exit, Akira smiled sweetly in my direction.

"I'm glad you're back to normal. I was worried about you, y'know."

For some reason, she looked positively delighted.



Our destination this time was the royal palace on Telluna. It was heavily guarded at all times, so unless there was some sort of event going on, people typically weren't allowed in. However, we still had one free item remaining from winning the guild mission, so they allowed us inside to get it.

As a reminder, our first choice had been given to Homura in

exchange for making that alliance with us. The second one was a warp item that let Kokoru come visit us whenever he wanted. As for the third...

I exchanged it for a Peregrine Stone! I had to replace the one I lost due to an unfortunate misclick! The fact that we still had this remaining right when I needed it was a blessing indeed.

Normally, I would have wanted to pick something more permanently useful. But things were different now, as we needed to get through the Hadean Rose as soon as possible. We had neither the money for a new one, nor the time to grind for it!

Well, it was my fault that we were broke, yes. I would have to find a way to make the guild shop more profitable to take care of that. Otherwise, it wouldn't be able to keep up with my drama cannon's costs, which were spiraling out of control. Once this was over, I'd give it some thought.

Anyway, with our Peregrine Stone in hand, we left the palace.

I said my goodbyes to the gatekeeper NPC. "So long! Thanks for all the items."

Next to me, Akira sighed. "Was that the right choice? I'm sure we could've found something better."

"It's cool! Maeda and Yano said it was fine, remember?"

I had messaged those two a while back and confirmed with them. They didn't especially seem to mind. Their reaction was more or less the same as Akira's.

"With this, we can take down that Hadean Rose!"

"Are you sure? It's not gonna go to waste or anything?"

"Huh? What, are you worried?"

"I mean, we used that Super Special Warp Stone and still failed. If we bomb again this time, I think morale's gonna drop like a rock. I'm used to it, but they're different."

Uh, what's with that glare?

"Umm, why such a sour face?"

"Again, I don't mind, but I just remembered... in EF and other games, we'd spend night after night experimenting just for it to all go to waste in the end."

"Oh, I get it. That's how you always looked on the other side of the screen, huh?"

"Yep! Whenever I did foot-stomping emotes, or shiny-eyed excitement emotes, or wore ogre masks, I'd always make the face in real life."

"Oh, jeez, I remember all that. That big beastman was scary as heck."

"Maybe, but it never seemed to deter you. You're the same way even now."

“Pretty much. Behind every success, there are ten hidden failures! There’s no point in getting down over it!”

“Big words for the guy who didn’t get dragged into it! Whatever. I guess you’re back to normal now, huh? Even after you looked like a sad puppy earlier.”

“Heh! A lot has happened, but I’m all good now!”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s hard for me to keep up with your passion right now since you’re all hyped out of nowhere. But really... let’s make this next one the last one, okay? Everybody’s tense, and it sucks.”

“Really?”

“I mean, yeah. You sent us off in such a weird way, and we all got so fired up over winning for you that it made us pretty nervous.”

“Oh, dang.”

“But even that was because you wanted me to get the Rainbow Guard, right? I couldn’t help but feel bad. Sorry, but I just don’t think everyone can really have fun like this.”

“Hold up, now. It’d be even worse if you got yanked out of school, Akira. Everyone agrees with me, trust me. That’s why we’re all so serious about it. We can’t choose our family. It’s not your fault, not in the slightest.”

“Hahaha. How sweet of you to say that. Once this is over, I’d better do something to thank everyone.”

“Ooh! How about you invite us all to your place? Bet you’ll have some good food we’ve never tasted before. Since it’s summer vacation, how about some curry or somen noodles? I gotta have some good food once in a while!”

“Whaaat?! Do you wanna come to my house IRL? Really?!”

“Well, yeah. Not if it’s a bother, though.”

“N-No, it’s cool! It’s more like a reward for me... Um, I mean... Anyway! After we finish this dungeon, I’ll invite everyone to my house. We’ll get lots of good food ready for you!”

“Awesome! Are you sure?”

“Yeah, totally! I won’t let my parents say no! So, you promise you’ll come?”

“Heck yeah. I’m excited.”

“Me too! Now that that’s decided, let’s go hunt that Hadean Rose! Go, go, go!”

Akira was beaming as she tugged me by the arm. Before I knew it, she was even more motivated than I was.



After we got back to the floating cottage, we headed off to Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. Once again, not many people were around; they were all at the game stands, trying to get Super Special Warp

Stones.

Everyone present was either here to try new strategies or to try to farm for Special and Super Special Warp Stones in Aswarth's itself. Just bringing an SSWS alone wouldn't be enough if there was no limit to the number of roses, though.

It was unclear whether other parties had tried it yet, but even if they failed, they wouldn't let that information out so easily. After all, that would help other people get a leg up. If anyone was going to make it public, it would be *after* they cleared the dungeon. No doubt they would reveal it with smug grins on their faces, having secured the Rainbow Guard for themselves. Dammit, I wanted that to be me! I just had to improve the symbologist's reputation!

Either way, if a method had been made clear, this place would be chock-full of people hoping to copy it. The fact that it wasn't happening meant that the Hadean Rose had not yet been conquered.

Okay! Today, we're gonna be the first to do it!

We had swapped Kataoka back out for me, so our members were Akira, Maeda, Yano, Akabane, Shizuku, and yours truly.

"It's a good thing we saved up one final Special Warp Stone because the game stands are packed right now. It'd take forever to get more."

Beating the target scores in each game yielded Special Warp Stones, which gave you an hour, twice that of the normal stones. With all the guilds interfering with the stands, you had to stand in line for eons to get one. It would've been a huge waste of time. While we dawdled, Emily, Yukino, or Homura's party would easily get a leg up over us.

"Yeah. We gotta win this today!" Akira said.

"Do you have a plan?" Maeda asked me.

"Of course I do! But you'll have to wait and see."

"Ooh, can't wait. I hate that stupid flower so much, I can't wait to see it stomped into the ground!" Yano growled.

Her agitation resonated with Akabane. "I wholeheartedly agree. It's beyond frustrating that it wasted our Super Special Warp Stone."

"Victory is everything in these competitions," commented Shizuku. "If you believe it will bring us victory, then I'll expect great things."

"Good, because that's what you're gonna see. Just leave it to me!"

We conversed as we approached the entrance.

"Dammiit!"

Just then, we heard Yukino and Homura shouting in unison. The two of them ran in our direction.

What happened? Did they bring the Hadean Rose down to low health and die to something cheap?

“Hey, girls! What’s the matter?” I asked.

Akira’s brow furrowed. “Did something happen?”

“Oh! Hey Ren, Akira! Man, this game sucks butt!” Yukino complained.

“It’s clearly your fault. Reflect on your past self instead of blaming the game,” Homura admonished her.

“What? You didn’t finish either!”

“It’s different! You’re like, twice as bad as me!”

What in the world were they fighting over?

“Did the Hadean Rose do something crazy?!”

“Well, y’see—”

“Yukino, shut up! We’re competing, remember?!”

“Urk! Um, right. Sorry, Ren. You heard her.”

“Yeah, no problem. I get it.”

“Sorry, pal. Let me just say, though: it may be much worse than you all expected.”

“We’ll be fine! See, we’ve got our own plan in mind.”

Our levels were lower than theirs, so the Hadean Rose might have had different stats or attacks when they fought it. It was adjusted to have a similar difficulty at all level ranges, but we didn’t know what range might actually have it easiest. We couldn’t test it either.

“Good luck, Ren! We’re gonna head home. Later!”

“Hurry up, Yukino! We have to go now!”

Back home? Are they not gonna take a second swing at it? Maybe they have some stuff to take care of.

Either way, after seeing them off, our gang went to the entrance of Aswarth’s.

“Hey, guys! If you wanna go in, pop a Warp Stone into my mouth!” chirped the lion’s head.



“Here’s a Special Warp Stone. B71F, please!”

Off we go!

“Kaaay! Come on in.”

The world warped and distorted before us as we teleported into the dungeon. By the time my vision returned to normal, we had arrived on B71F. The walls were made of dark-blue stones. Since we’d used a Special Warp Stone, our time limit was sixty minutes.

The Hadean Rose was on B80F, so we had to get there the normal way. That meant clearing each floor as we went, which could take a long time. Hopefully, we wouldn’t get any crazy clear conditions. Worst-case scenario, we’d stumble into a monster house, get overwhelmed by the mobs, and die. I figured it was unlikely, but it seriously hurt every single time. If I mentioned it, I’d probably jinx us, so I did my best to ignore it.

“So, what’s the goal?!”

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat all monsters!

Huh. Well, normal enough! We just have to do some killing.

“I’ll go grab those enemies!”

Yano activated Sprint and ran off. As it said on the tin, it was a skill that made the user run faster. With this, she could intentionally drag enemies around and back to us while evading their attacks. Ideally, she would be able to bring a train of every monster on the floor our way. Then, we would ambush them and kill ’em all at once!

I could also drag a train of monsters myself using Enervating Circle’s slowing effect, but my movement speed was normal. It was a lot faster for the agile Yano to draw them in instead. Since we were focused on efficiency, we had to rely on the optimal choice.

“I guess we should pick up some AP, huh?” Akira said.

“Agreed!” Akabane replied.

Akira and the others ran to the nearest enemy and started battering it. Yano was smart, leaving the closest enemy behind and grabbing all the others instead. Everyone was quick to act. It felt as though teamwork as a whole was improved. That must have been because of their previous trip.

I almost felt like I was reacting slower after all the shocks I’d encountered earlier, like seeing Kokoru’s house, Draco the Potty Mouth, and the insane strength of Master Mommaru. I had to get to work too! Not that there was much I could do yet.

Frankly, I still wasn’t very good at dealing with the smaller

monsters along the way, so it wasn't yet my time to shine. For now, I supported the girls with Elemental Circle while building up my own AP.

After a while, Yano brought back a ton of monsters for us to kill.

"You're up, buds!"

"Thanks, Yuuna!"

"Let us fight!"

"Leave the punching to me!"

Akira, Akabane, and Shizuku started unleashing area-of-effect arts and ultimates, making short work of most of the enemies. Some slime monsters remained due to their resistance to physical attacks, but Maeda finished them off with some quick offensive magic.

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

Uhh... No problem! My time will come on B80F! Until then, I'm pretty much just leeching off the team, but whatever! At least I can use Elemental Circle now. That's an improvement, right? Shame it kinda sucks, though!

"Let's go, Ren!" Akira called out to me.

Ah, how reliable! Carry me to B80F, girls!

With that, we progressed to B72F.

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat all monsters!

Hmm. Well, apart from my parasitism stinging me yet again, this should be easy.

As expected, we cleared it with no particular issues. Next up was B73F.

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat the giant monster!

"Whoa, it's an Island Bunny! My boy came back to me bigger than ever!"

"Maybe he got bigger because he's mad at you for randomly killing all his friends?"

"Pssh, what? As if. Anyway, we've gotta kill him!"

"Okay. Let's see what he does!"

Akira unleashed a Skyfall shock wave.

“BWEEEEEE!”

“Uh, wow, he died in one hit!” I remarked.

“Huh?!” Akira blurted. “But he was so big!”

“Oh, I think I get it. It just multiplies their base stats or level or something. Since he started off weak, multiplying that a few times didn’t do much.”

“Now I feel bad for hurting him...”

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

Anyway, off to B74F!

Ping!

Gate Condition: Answer six questions correctly!
Wrong answers result in a penalty!

Whoa, a pop quiz?!

“Please save us!” Yano and I cried at the same time.

I didn’t feel too bad being a leech on this floor thanks to my comrade here! It was good to have friends.

“I’ve got this,” Maeda declared as she stepped forward.

“Let’s do our best, Kotomi!” Akira was right next to her.

With our current setup, we could let these two handle it. Both of us had started getting better grades since we came to this school, but Akira and Maeda were on another level. Truly, rich girls and professors’ daughters were made of stronger stuff. Their educations were thorough!

However, once you have answered correctly one time, you may no longer answer!

“Whaaat?!” blurted three of us at once.

Yo, what the heck?! Our desperate handoff didn’t work?! Under these rules, Yano and I are gonna have to give correct answers to proceed. Wait, who else was yelling?!

Akira and Maeda were more than ready, and Shizuku looked perfectly fine.

Akabane, then?

When I looked at her, she said, “Erm, what is the matter? Is there

something on my face?”

“No, I was just wondering if you were okay.”

“N-No need to worry about me! Think about yourself first!”

“Okay, fine. But—”

Just then, Maeda interjected, “Yuuna, Takashiro! If a question comes up that you know, you should answer first! Any questions you don’t know, we will take care of for you.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Maeda and Akira were all-knowing, after all. We were best off leaving the hard questions to them.

Anyway, bring on the math! Math was my one and only specialty.

First question! The topic is... art! In digital painting and photo retouching software, what do you call the virtual sheets of paper that the images go on?

“Ooh, ooh! I know this one, guys! They’re called layers!”

Ping!

Correct!

“Woo! I did it! One question down!” Yano jumped for joy.

That was the perfect question for her. She loved art.

“Well done, Yuuna!” Maeda cheered.

Akira grinned. “Good job! Let’s keep it up, everyone!”

“Now we’ve really got the advantage, girls!” I said.

Our worst offender had gotten us through the first question!

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking. ‘Thank goodness our dumbest member got through this one,’ right?!”

“Huh? Erm...”

“Ahahaha...”

“Eheh...”

The three of us averted our eyes.

“Ahaha! I thought of it first! I win, I win! Phew, what a relief! I’ll kick back and watch now, so goood luck! That goes double for you, Takashiro, since you haven’t helped at all!”

“Look at you, talking big now! You were crying out in despair with me just a few minutes ago!”

“Hmph! Only the successful, the chosen few, would understand my feelings!”

She was in a damn good mood now. I wanted to get one right and join the chosen few!

“Urk! I-I can help if it asks a math question! C’mon, math! Math, math, math!”

Second question! The topic is... math!

Finally! Leave the numbers to me, girls. My time has come!

Five people are playing hide-and-seek. Two have been found. How many more are hiding?

“Yes, I know this one!” Akabane shouted before I could answer. “It’s three! Three people!”

Bzzzt! Wrong!

“What?! B-But...!”

“Akabane, it’s two!” I told her. “One person’s seeking, so only four people are hiding to begin with.”

“Oh, of course. I can’t believe I did that!”

She’d let her nerves get the best of her. Was Akabane bad at pop quizzes too? Since she was just as rich as Akira, I’d just assumed they were at about the same level here.

“No prob! We’ll get the next one!”

It’s time for your punishment! Who’s gonna get it?

Banananananana...

Whoa, is it random?! And what’s with the weird sound effect?!

Ding! It’s you!

A spotlight shone down on Akira.

“Huh?! Me?!”

Wow! So instead of punishing the person who got it wrong, it hurts someone else?

Your punishment will be... a metal suit!

With a loud poof, Akira was enveloped in gray smoke.

“Eep?!”

After a few seconds, the smoke cleared. Akira appeared in the usual yukata gear.

“Hm? You don’t look any different.”

What was the deal with the “metal suit,” then?

“Y-Yeah. I don’t think...”

A system window popped up in front of Akira.

Your Silk Dress was turned into metal!

Shocked, I took a look at the description.

Lead Silk Dress

Type: Armor

Level: 65

DEF: 66 (x3)

Sword Dancer only

Effect: While this item is equipped, user is unable to move.

“Whoa! The icon’s metal now too!”

It was the usual sword dancer gear Akira wore. This was about the right equipment for our level. The design was as cute as ever, and it was plenty revealing. It didn’t have any special properties like Angelic Charm’s guard-nullification, but it was pretty much law that as you leveled up, you would trade for higher-defense equipment. Based on its icon displayed in the window, it was supposed to be metallic now.

I see! So it tripled her defense, but she wouldn’t be able to move. That was the punishment’s “metal suit,” then.

“Oho! Depending on how we use this...”

The effect itself had its upsides and downsides. As always, Akira had gotten lucky. Her luck stat was capped in both item drops *and* real life. Even when she got an unlucky punishment, it was hardly terrible.

The Silk Dress itself was something that could be bought from shops, so losing one of them to get min-maxed equipment like this wasn’t bad at all. We would’ve been in big trouble if it had been Angelic Charm.

Maybe it specifically avoids changing rare gear?

I would have expected it to transform the yukata since she was wearing it, but it was possible that it had chosen the Silk Dress specifically to avoid that.

Man, imagine if the quiz chose me and my Peregrine Damascus Sword became useless after I used my free choice on it. Phew! That would’ve sucked.

“Maybe it’s not that bad? Anyway, let’s try harder on the next one! Okay, Nozomi?”

“Y-Yes. I won’t make such a mistake again.”

When would the next math question come, anyway? It seemed

totally unfair that I'd lost out on my turn.

Third question! The topic is... English!

Welp, there's my worst subject!

I was not the least bit interested. The only English words I knew were gaming terms.

"Akira, Maeda! I'm counting on you!"

"Ahaha... You gave up on thinking really fast, Ren."

"Very well. We'll just have to do it."

"Chirp! I wanna try! I'm good at English!"

Draco flew around in circles.

"Wow! Good boy, Draco! Maybe you'll succeed where Ren failed."

"Yes, good boy! Who's a good widdle boy?"

Akira and Maeda smiled and praised Draco.

Shizuku seemed impressed. "Hmm. So the pet is able to understand its master's preferences? How well-made."

Oh no! Draco grew up to be such a potty mouth because I suck at English! Is showing off some improved English skills the only way to clean up his potty mouth?!

"I take that back! Watch this, Draco; I'm gonna nail it!"

"Chirp? Okay, go! Good luck!"

Great! Now, the question was whether I'd get it right!

Explain the meaning of the following sentence: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Uhh...? When in a room...? Do as... romance too? In a room? Like, a room of a house? Romance? Like the dramatic kind, right? Like a drama cannon!

Drama... in a room. What are they doing, analyzing data? A drama cannon can only be built on careful data analysis! In other words, it means to do your due diligence, gather data, and pursue drama. Right?

Hmm, what saying sounds kinda like that? Something like a proverb. You need to test and analyze for drama... Oh, heck! I know just the one!

"Ooh! Me, me, me!"

"Are you sure?!" Akira asked me, worried.

"Yeah, I got this! I've conquered my failures at English. Watch this, Draco!"

"Chirp! Ren go!"

"My answer is... If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles!"

You gotta make minute preparations to win, yeah! In other words, the great Sun Tzu was saying that the experimenters will inherit the world!

Bzzzt! Wrong!

“What?! H-How was that wrong?!”

Maeda looked exasperated. “Takashiro, please... It means to follow the conventions of the place that you’re in.”

“Ohhh! They said *Romans*, not romance?! Gaaah, I was so close!”

“That wasn’t close at all,” Akira replied. “It’s not like you to try to force an answer like that.”

“Well, I had to look good, y’know!”

“Umm...”

It’s time for your punishment! Who’s gonna get it?

Banananananana...

The system was ready to claim yet another victim.

Couldn’t they at least go easy on me?! I was so brave, trying to answer something about my worst subject! Aaargh, it’s almost done picking!

Ding! It’s you!

The spotlight had landed on me.

“Huh? Me?!”

Yano took the opportunity to heckle me again. “It’s your own fault, bub! Get the answer wrong, you get the punishment!”

She was full of hot air now just because she’d gotten hers right.

So, uh, what’s the punishment?

I was a little afraid of the metal suit. I didn’t need my gear getting janky right now.

Your punishment will be... sealed skills! Until you leave the dungeon, some of your skills will be unusable!

“WHAT?! NOOOOO!”

Oh man, this is really bad! I’ll be in big danger if Final Strike or Quickdraw gets sealed! That’s all it would take to ruin me! Please, please, not Final Strike!

Dammit! All I wanted to do was show Draco that Daddy was good at English! I can’t answer any more English questions; it’s way too dangerous! Next time, I’ll just leave it to the brainiacs!

Ren can no longer use Grow Up!

“Oh?! Phew, thank goodness!”

I brought a hand to my heart in relief.

I wasn't gonna use this anyway, so— Oh. Wait. NOOO!

“Aha! So you *did* learn Grow Up, didn't you?! Why'd you lie to us? You'd better show us later!” Akira demanded in a huff.

Argh! Now they know that we learned Grow Up! It doesn't affect our in-game progress, but this seriously increases the difficulty of my interpersonal relationships! The girls are definitely going to see grown-up Draco now!

“Draco, did you learn how to get bigger? I'm so excited to see you all grown up!”

As I sank deeper into despair, Maeda's eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“Chirp! I'm gonna grooow!”

Stop being in such a good mood, you little rascal! Grrr...

I couldn't let these excited girls see the awful truth—the F***ing Dragon that my pure little boy would grow up to be! I was done for, and my mood was ruined.

Yet the terrifying quiz mercilessly continued!

On to the next question...

Akira said, “Ren, you don't have to force the ones you don't know. We'll take care of it.”

“Yeah, I know. My bad!”

At the very least, we probably wouldn't get another English question for a while. I was hoping we'd finish this before that!

Fourth question! The topic is... music!

Nope, not for me.

I decided to shut up. Speaking out of turn here was bad news. At this point, I could just ignore questions I didn't know. We still had Maeda and Akira, so they should take care of those just fine!

My silence strategy succeeded. The girls got the fourth, fifth, and sixth questions right! Maeda, Shizuku, and Akira answered their questions with ease. Now Akabane and I were the only ones left.

Seventh question! The topic is... math!

“Ooh!”

This was it! My ultimate chance! I was gonna get this one!

Akira cheered me on. “Good luck, Ren! You can do this.”

“Yeah! I’m gonna get it, just watch.”

“Good luuuck, ’Zomi!” Yano shouted encouragingly.

“Y-Yes, I’ll do my best!”

I couldn’t tell if she was okay with that weird name, or if she just didn’t have it in her to get mad at this crucial moment. Either way, Akabane was fighting a hard battle like me.

Wasn’t she supposed to be like, Akira’s rival before? I thought rivals were supposed to have similar grades. Is that not true?

At that moment, the question appeared before us!

A businessman drove from his home to a neighboring town, and then he drove back. On the way there, he drove 40 mph. On the way back, he drove 60 mph. What was his average speed?

“Me, me, me, me, me!”

I raised my hand lightning fast. This question was too easy!

“The answer is forty-eight mph!”

“Excuse me?! The answer is obviously fif—”

Ping!

Correct!

One heckler tried to stop me, but I was right. *Thanks for the comment, but no thanks!*

“Huh?! How?” Yano asked. “Like, cool and all, but what? Kotomi, explain.”

“If you go sixty miles per hour, you take less time traveling. Average speed involves dividing by time spent, so if the time is shorter, you can’t just add them together and divide by two.”

“Wow, I get it! Except it actually makes no sense at all.”

Maeda was correct. I would’ve liked to explain it in a more smug fashion myself, but oh well! Now it was time for the final question!

“Good luck on the last one, Akabane,” I told her. “End it on a good note.”

“I-I know! Stop worrying about me!”

Akira shot her a look of concern. “Nozomi, are you okay? Do you feel sick?”

“Stop! I’m not sick; it’s just that my grades have been slipping a bit, and I’m rather worried about them. Even my brother has noticed.”

Hah! Instead of complaining about her grades, Ryuutarou should do something about his personality.

Akabane was such a good sister for respecting him despite his

flaws.

“Why are your grades falling, though? In a school like ours, no less!”

I couldn’t help but speak my mind. In this school, where your grades were converted to in-game rewards, how could someone’s grades fall? I used to think Yano wouldn’t touch a textbook with a ten-foot pole, but even *her* grades were going up.

“That means it has to do with something other than the game,” said Akira. “Is it related to the thing you told me about before, Nozomi?”

“Aaaah! Hold on! Say nothing more of that, please! You see, um, there is just so much fun to be had in life that—”

“Okay, but that’s no excuse to let your grades drop.”

“Y-You will understand before long, I’m sure! There’s no getting around it! It’s like an addiction!”

I was completely lost. “Hm? What’s up? Did some cool new game come out when I wasn’t looking?”

Is Akabane cheating on this game for another one? I guess it is common. Wait, why are they both glaring at me?!

“Anyway,” Akira continued, “this grade drop is a temporary thing. I know you’re smart; you’ve just gotta be strong!”

“Yes. I will do what I can.”

Our next trivia question had to do with Japanese. Akabane regained her calm and answered it without issue. Finally, we were off to the next floor: B75F.

Man, that one was rough!

Ping!

Defeat all enemies!

“Woohoo!” I cheered. “Let’s ride, girls!”

Yano was equally thrilled. “Yes, my brain can take a back seat on this one!”

“You two recovered fast, didn’t you?” Akira muttered.

“That they did,” Maeda replied.

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

Upon reaching B76F, we were greeted by another *ping!*

Defeat all enemies!

“Another, eh? I like not having to think, but this takes up a ton of time!”

“Don’t complain, just move! I’m gonna grab the enemies!”

“Good luck, Yuuna!”

“Go as fast as you possibly can!”

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

Another floor, another *ping!*

Defeat all enemies!

“Yo, cool it with this one! We’re almost out of time!”

“Hurry!”

“Yeah, we gotta go!”

“I’m starting to worry about the time limit!”

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

We descended to B78F. We were really getting close now!

Ping!

Defeat all enemies!

“Aaaargh, cut it out! What kind of stupid joke is this?!”

“Bad luck! Maybe *somebody* jinxed us by coming in!”

“Haha, yeah. Ren does have bad luck with items and other RNG stuff.”

“Hurry! We barely have ten minutes left!”

Ping!

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

I was feeling tense. Just one more floor, and we would see the Hadean Rose! We were short on time, but we should still make it! We had to hurry.

Gimme something easy! C’mooon, easy! How about another giant

monster, something as weak as that Island Bunny before? Please!

I downright prayed as we warped to B79F. Alas...

Bwop, bwop, bwop!

“Grrrrr!”

Shaka-shaka-shaka!

Right when we entered, I heard the sounds of countless monsters. They were crammed in the big chamber together like passengers on the subway.

What brought them all here? Some kind of party? A mosh, maybe?

Oh, of course. It’s a monster mosh, here to bring down a graveyard smash upon us!

“Aaah! Why now?! Whyyyy?!”

Who controls this awful dungeon?! I mean, I know nobody’s actually pitting it against us, and it’s all bad luck—but it just feels so intentional, so malicious!

Then came the ruthless *ping!*

It’s a Monster House!

Monsters are spawning in huge numbers all over the floor!

Thanks! I hadn’t noticed! Oh, whoops! Everyone’s already being beaten to death!

This is a rare occurrence. Bad luck for you!

The gate is already open!

Hurry and escape through the gate to the next floor!

Yeah, yeah, I know already!

“Agh! Tortoise Guard!”

To start, I had to immediately use my protective art. Enemies battered me from all directions, but most of them dealt zero or single-digit damage. We had to deal with them while I tanked. This made me a brick wall, but I couldn’t move.

We need that breakthrough right now! I can’t just sit here and wait to die!

However, something truly lamentable was happening right beside me.

Dealt 181 damage to Kotomi.

Dealt 225 damage to Kotomi.

Dealt 202 damage to Kotomi.

Dealt 234 damage to Kotomi.

Dealt 262 damage to Kotomi.

Dealt 249 damage to Kotomi.
Dealt 255 damage to Kotomi.
Dealt 278 damage to Kotomi.
Dealt 263 damage to Kotomi.
Kotomi is exhausted...

“Sorry! I didn’t have a chance!”

Maeda, our party member with the lowest defense, fell first.

“Nobody told me this would happen!”

Nozomi is exhausted...

Nooo! There goes Akabane too!

“See?! You are bad luck!”

“This is horrid!”

Yuuna is exhausted...

Shizuku is exhausted...

Our shield-bearing Yano and our bare-handed brawler Shizuku fell at the same time. Shield or not, you couldn’t stop enemies who attacked from behind.

Akira activated Healing Dance.

Ren recovered 250 HP.

Amid the terror, I noticed another log message. *Is Akira safe?!* She was about as frail as Akabane, so I had just assumed she’d fallen while I wasn’t paying attention.

“Ren, are you okay?! Can you hold out?”

When I turned to look, I saw that she was surrounded just like me! It was hard to spot her through the crowd, but she wasn’t in the usual yukata. Instead, she was wearing her sword dancer gear, although this time it was metallic and shiny. Other than that, it seemed unchanged.

Ooh, that’s the gear that got the metal suit treatment!

Dealt 11 damage to Akira.
Dealt 16 damage to Akira.
Dealt 7 damage to Akira.
Dealt 21 damage to Akira.
Dealt 16 damage to Akira.
Dealt 14 damage to Akira.
Dealt 5 damage to Akira.
Dealt 8 damage to Akira.

Dealt 17 damage to Akira.

“Whoa, sick! You’re tanky as heck!”

Akira wasn’t going all-in on VIT like I was, but the damage was about the same as what I was taking under the effect of Tortoise Guard. Though she was being beaten to a pulp, the damage was low enough that she had plenty of time to react.

“Yeah! If not for the metal suit, I would’ve died the moment we got in here.”

She really resembled a metallic slime in that ensemble. It was still the normal sword dancer gear, however, so it was super revealing. How could it have so much defense when it exposed more skin than it covered?! Classic video game cliché; in real life, that exposed skin would be wide open to attack. I for one welcomed the sexy yet effective gear! It was wonderful!

Akira activated Healing Dance.

Akira recovered 188 HP.

Sword dancers’ recovery cost AP, and whenever enemies attacked her, she would get more. The healing-to-AP-consumed ratio of her dances was higher than the damage-to-AP-gained ratio of enemy attacks, so her HP didn’t fall. Akira was an eternally healing, unsinkable battleship.

“Can you heal me in time?!”

“Yeah, I can! I’ve actually got too much AP on my hands, haha!”

This time, Akira healed me. When she did, some enemies crowding around me peeled away and made a beeline for her. By healing me, she had generated healing aggro, causing them to prioritize her. If this went on, soon enough, they would all go to her.

As long as I was maintaining Tortoise Guard, I couldn’t move. Once it wore off, I wouldn’t be able to survive. Similarly, while Akira was wearing her Lead Silk Dress, she couldn’t move either. It was essentially like she was forever using Tortoise Guard.

From that point of view, it was pretty awesome equipment—aside from the fact that you had to pick the perfect spot to pop it on and stand your ground. While the two of us stood there, immobile and nearly invulnerable, we risked running out of time. We had to be careful.

Akira taking aggro with her heals was a lifesaver. Once they all focused on her, I would be able to move again.

“Ren! I’m good to take all the aggro. Once you think you’re safe to move, go ahead!”

Akira and I were on the same page.

“Yeah, thanks!”

She sent another heal my way, prompting more monsters to go to her. After two or three more, I was free and the enemies were all on Akira.

“Now’s your chance, Ren! Run to the next gate!”

“Okay!”

As more enemies crowded around Akira, they started pounding on her like a machine gun. *Is this it? Are there just too many enemies?!*

Well, as long as I can safely move, I have one trick up my sleeve!

“Draco, let’s do this! Enervating Circle!”

I cast my movement-slowing circle magic! I spread it out wide, targeting Draco as usual. Thanks to his Target Marker, he could move my circles around for me.

“Akira, jump!”

“Okay! Equipment Set B!”

She changed into Angelic Charm. Then, wasting no time, she readied a jumping slash.

“Hawk Strike!”

Her attack allowed her to soar over the horde of monsters. The enemies would normally just run after her to crowd her landing spot, but they were being slowed down by Enervating Circle. Running as fast as we could, the two of us just barely escaped their clutches.

“Thanks, Ren!”

“No problem! Let’s go find that gate.”

“Yeah!”

We ran with a huge train of monsters following behind us. If we could just get to the gate, we would be safe.

“It’s just the two of us right now! Are we gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. As long as you and I are together, we can manage!”

“Really?! Now I’m getting excited!”

Ping!

It has been 57 minutes since you entered. In 180 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

Three more minutes! We still have a chance.

We sprinted around a corner and, at the end of the long corridor, we saw it.

“Ooh, there’s the gate! We found it!”

“That we did! It’s in the perfect spot.”

“Let’s dive right in! We’re almost out of time!”

“Actually, no. Akira, stop right in front of the gate and change back into your metal suit. Then, just hang on for a bit.”

“Huh?! But we’ve only got—”

“This is important!”

“Um, okay! If you say so, then I’ll believe in you. Just know I’m not convinced!”

“That’s not believing in me! That’s doubting me!”

“But all my past experience... Bleh, never mind. Here goes!”

Akira came to a grinding halt in front of the gate to the next floor. As she did, she changed into her Lead Silk Dress.

“Come at me, monsters!”

The enemies all fell on her at once and started whaling on her yet again. No matter how tanky she was with that metal suit, she probably wouldn’t last long against so many enemies. I stayed at a distance and watched. With all the aggro focused on Akira, the enemies outright ignored me.

As the hallway was so thin, almost all of the enemies were bouncing off the walls between Akira and me.

Perfect. The time has come!

“Equipment Set D!”

The “D” stands for Death Chariot! Not that I planned that, or anything. Heheheh. Time to show them what the Death Chariot is made of!

“Elemental Circle!”

With the Death Chariot gear’s hidden effect, I was guaranteed a dark circle. It looked as though a black light had filled the path. Now that I had the perfect camouflage, I was ready for the hunt! I quickly began to craft, putting together a damascus sword and damascus cane to make a Canesword.

This time, I didn’t use the Peregrine Damascus Sword. Not yet. I never knew which I might need for what was to come, so I had gone through the dungeon without a Canesword. This one would be the prelude for what was to come!

“Equipment Set A!”

I returned to my normal gear.

“Final Strike! Now, have a taste of my ult! Vermilion Wiiiing!”

Fwoooooom!

I charged with my sword at the ready, covered in billowing flames. One special characteristic of the attack was that it would hurt every enemy in its path, as it had a straight-line area of effect. I caught almost every enemy in the blast, blowing them all away.

“Woo! Big gains over here!”

“Ren, are you sure you should waste that on these little guys?! We really don’t have time!”

“It’s cool—that was necessary! Check my HP!”

“Oh, wow! It doubled!”

That was thanks to my dark circle. If you had full HP and absorbed more, it increased your maximum HP temporarily. Very useful! My ultimates became stronger when there was a large difference between my current HP and my max. Since my HP doubled, so did my might!

This boost would only last for three minutes, though, so I had to do it right before we went to the Hadean Rose. The timing had been pretty much perfect. This prep was absolutely necessary, so I had originally planned to use it on the Black Roses spawned by the Hadean Rose. This was much safer, though.

“Yep! With greater max HP comes greater power!”

“Cool! Okay, off to the next floor! We gotta hurry!”

Ping!

It has been 58 minutes since you entered. In 120 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

“Two minutes, Ren!”

“Wait, hold up! Haah!”

I bopped one of the survivors near me with a normal attack. It dealt about 90% of the monster’s health, leaving it just barely alive.

“Huh?! What are you doing?! We! Have! No! Time!”

“I don’t have enough AP after all that! Don’t touch, Akira; I’ve gotta gather AP right now!”

“Argh, so annoying. Just hurry! If you had dual-wielding, you could just slap ’em a bunch and get AP twice as fast!”

“NO dual-wielding!”

Popular skills were the enemy. My definition of fun involved overcoming those with my meta-redefining abilities! I had neither the desire nor the ability to dual-wield, but after rushing as much as I could, I got my AP. I had 300 AP now, so I was at full power!

“Okay, sorry for the wait!”

“Good, now let’s hurry. We’re gonna get kicked out!”

“Sorry to have you do this now, but can I get a Sword Samba?”

I had just used Final Strike, which would normally require me to wait for a cooldown. If Akira didn’t use Sword Samba to refresh it, we would run out of time without being able to deal the final blow.

“Aw, jeez, you’re right. Sword Samba!”

“Thanks! As usual, I couldn’t do it without you, Akira.”

“You’ve got that right. But that’s okay with me! Let’s go.”

“Yeeeah!”

Ping!

It has been 59 minutes since you entered. In 60 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

Having come out the victors, we launched ourselves into the warp gate with just a minute to spare. Finally, we'd made it to B80F! Like before, we were in a rectangular room with tons of plants growing all over the place.

Ping!

Gate Condition: Defeat the boss monster!

"We're back, boys! It was a long, hard road, but we made it."

The ground beneath our feet trembled as a gargantuan rose sprang up from the center of the room. Its blooms bore giant black petals. Our nemesis looked just as energetic as ever.

Level 120 Hadean Rose
Crown Icon (rare monster)

We were in a worse situation than last time. The worst possible, you could say. There was only one minute left, and four members of our six-person party had fallen. When Akira and I went through the gate, it must have brought our fallen friends with us. They were lying on the ground not far away.

"We've got this, everyone! I'm about to make up for all the times I was totally useless!"

It had taken me a great deal of blood, sweat, and tears, but all that was in the past now. Looking back, it had been an interesting game of trial and error.

"You only have a minute! Can you make it?!" Maeda cried.

"Hurry, dude!" Yano shouted. "Show us it was worth carrying your sorry butt!"

"We trust you," said Akabane. "If you're so confident, I can only imagine that you have quite an impressive scheme."

Shizuku, too, watched on. "Let's see it, young man. I can't wait."

I crafted a Canesword using a Peregrine Damascus Sword and a damascus cane. My lethal weapon was ready! It didn't even know that it had been born only to be destroyed right away. At the same time, the Hadean Rose noticed us and began to fight.

Hadean Rose sent seeds flying!
A Black Rose sprouted!

A Black Rose sprouted!
A Black Rose sprouted!
A Black Rose sprouted!
A Black Rose sprouted!
A Black Rose sprouted!

If left alone, it would continue to spew mini versions of himself. If damaged, it would do the exact same thing. When its Black Roses dealt damage, it healed for just as much.

“I’ll take aggro from the little ones!” Akira offered.

“Nah, don’t worry. This’ll be over in seconds,” I told her. “Final Strike!”

“Are you sure?!”

“Yep! Watch me one-shot it!”

I mean, if I *didn’t* one-shot it, we would run out of time.

Fortunately, my ingenious plan was designed to completely skip all of the most annoying parts of the fight and finish it before it truly began. That was how the drama cannon would shine its brightest!

My enemy’s HP was about 30,000. Typically, my ultimates dealt about 5,000 damage, but with the HP boost from my dark circle, that became 10,000. With the Peregrine Damascus Sword inside my Canesword, it doubled again—a grand total of 20,000 damage!

Up until this point, I hadn’t found a way to pile on more damage. That was why I had sent Akira and the others with the Super Special Warp Stone to try a battle of endurance. But then, at Kokoru’s house, I was able to secure even more strength, thanks to the Tie Shan Kao (temp) that Master Mommaru had bestowed upon me. On top of its already-high damage, when it was (temp), it came with a penalty that reduced the user’s HP to 1. But for a drama cannon that required bringing my HP down on purpose, that wasn’t a penalty at all—it was the biggest bonus I could ever want!

Since this could reduce my HP, I no longer needed to include Turnover in my ultimate. This fit nicely in its place. As a result, my ultimate was now made up of three skills that all dealt damage. I really did hate that this would only last until I lost the (temp), but this new ultimate was going to be the latest and greatest yet! It was a combination of Explosive Tackle, Tie Shan Kao (temp), and Swallow’s Blade! From my testing, I already knew that it would go beyond 30,000 damage.

I squatted down, put my hand on the grip of the Canesword, and readied myself to unleash my ultimate!

“Here goes! After this, we dive into the gate and find that save point!”

“Yeah!”

“Aww, yeah. Ultimate move!”

Flames billowed from me as I charged at the Hadean Rose! Instead of the usual tackling charge, this one used the Tie Shan Kao pose that would have me strike the enemy with my back. The fire enveloping me wasn't in the shape of a phoenix, but a humongous dragon's face.

Whump! Whump! Whump! Whump!

As I charged through the Black Roses, they were launched away and slammed into the walls. It came with a pretty hefty knockback. That wasn't a surprise after seeing how Master Mommaru had launched Draco away. Then, inside the dragon's head, I shot forth like a bullet and pierced the Hadean Rose!

Baboom!

There was a loud noise, followed by the Hadean Rose's stem bending. It couldn't knock something *that* big around, of course—but that was only the first half of my ultimate! After that, I unsheathed my Canesword!

“Dragon Lord's Twin Tuusks!”

A crimson V-shape tore through the Hadean Rose.

Psheeeeeew!

Ren activated Dragon Lord's Twin Tusks!

Dealt 33,457 damage to Black Rose!

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Dealt 33,457 damage to Black Rose!

Ren activated Dragon Lord's Twin Tusks!

Dealt 33,457 damage to Black Rose!

Ren activated Dragon Lord's Twin Tusks!

Dealt 33,457 damage to Hadean Rose!

Ren has defeated Black Rose.

Ren has defeated Black Rose.

Ren has defeated Black Rose.

Ren has defeated Black Rose.

Ren has defeated Black Rose.

Ren has defeated Black Rose.
Ren has defeated Hadean Rose.

YES, YES, YES! YEEEEES!!!

Everything had gone according to plan!

Chapter 7: Akira and Shizuku

System logs flowed down the screen like a waterfall, announcing our victory.

Gate Condition cleared! The gate has opened!

“Woooooow, that was awesome! You really did it with just one attack!”

“Heheheh! That I did! This is the biggest-brain play out there, one that nullified all of its stupid flower-summoning and self-healing gimmicks!”

“Meh... It’s more like an extreme power play, isn’t it? Since you just skipped all the thinking and killed it in one hit.”

“Yeah? Well, this ‘power play’ took tons of minute experimenting and advance preparation! Thus, big-brain.”

While we bickered, another message appeared with a *ping!*

In 30 seconds, you will be booted from the dungeon.

“Whoops! Okay, it doesn’t matter! Let’s go!”

“It *does* matter, but fine!”

Akira and I made a mad dash for the warp gate to the next floor. Once we entered, we saw the save point, a pedestal with some sort of jewel on it.

“Save point spotted!”

“Hurry, Ren!”

“You got it!”

I whipped out the Serrurian Dish and placed it against the save point.

Progress saved! In future attempts, you can choose to start on this floor!

“Nice! That’s a Hadean Rose clear for us!”

It has been 60 minutes since you entered. You will now be booted from the dungeon.

Our time was up! We were transported back to the entrance of Aswarth's Undersea Ruins. Everyone who had died inside recovered, and they were standing nearby.

"Heh. So, girls? Did we nail it, or what? That was all part of my plan!"

"Yes! We finally cleared it! Great job, Ren!"

Akira pounced on me, apparently very excited to have won.

"Um, yeah! We sure did!"

How could I not enjoy a hug from a girl this cute? *I'll take it!*

This game was very careful about replicating human touch, so Akira should have been soft... except for some reason, she was firm and hard to the touch.

Oh, right. It's the Lead Silk Dress. Did she change into that just in case?

"Wow, this stuff really does feel like metal."

"Ah, yep. This thing saved our hides."

"It's awesome how it has high defense but still exposes so much skin. I love that the game still protects you there—very on-brand for MMOs. Yes, yes, very nice."

As long as it let me savor the sights, I was all for it.

"You gawk too much, Ren! Jeez, you never hold back. But maybe we should thank Nozomi for causing this to happen. If she hadn't, we wouldn't have made it to the end."

Akira looked over at Akabane.

"Well, yes. Getting the answer wrong was my mistake, but in the end, it became our greatest asset."

"Nah, that's just luck. You looked mad as heck."

"Luck is one component of skill!"

"C'mon, now, we won!" Yano interjected. "Let's call it even, okay?"

"Now we can continue on! We must be in the lead!" Maeda said, excited.

As we all jumped for joy, Shizuku alone seemed bitter.

"It's all well and good that you've overcome adversity, but there is a problem." Shizuku pointed at Akira in her Lead Silk Dress. "I don't care about those Akabanes, but I didn't think that *you* would wear such indecent attire. I don't believe it's right for a schoolgirl to wear that. How will you justify this?"

Shizuku had criticized the Akabanes when she first saw them. Akira had been there for it, so she'd kept herself from wearing the sword dancer gear around Shizuku. That had worked out well for us, thanks to how convenient the yukata was. But with the way things were going at the end, she'd had to change gear.

Akira swallowed hard. "I already know my parents would be mad

if they saw me, okay?"

"Your family has higher standards than the Akabanes, so it's my duty to point it out for you. If people tell you that you lack self-awareness, it's your own fault."

"You don't have to be so stuffy," I said, stepping in. "Without that equipment, we would have been defeated. Besides, the whole point of all this is so that she doesn't have to wear that 'indecent attire' you won't stop complaining about. How can you blame her?"

"What you're saying is only further proof that there's a self-awareness problem. Now stay out of this."

"I'm free to speak as I please. What gives you the right to insult Akira like this?"

Just as the situation was starting to get heated, an interloper flew onto the scene.

"But wait, I say! Wait, my beloved sister!"

A masked pervert had appeared to intrude on their argument—with his usual arms-crossed, cool-guy pose!

When did he get here?! Did this guy use Vanishing Whirl just to eavesdrop on us?! What is his deal?!

"I do understand your point, but I do find it rather difficult to agree with you, Iwao Aoyagi."

Aoyagi? Is he talking to Shizuku?!

I was rattled, but Akira herself was downright flabbergasted.

"HUH?! Grandpa?!"

That's her grandpa's name?! But wait, Shizuku looks like a young woman.

"Actually, I *felt* like I knew you for some reason! Now I get it! You look just like Granny did when she was younger!"

"Urk! Well, yes. It wouldn't be quite right for a nation's minister to log in to this game as is. They told me that they could replicate the appearance of any human, so I chose her."

"Did you get bored while your broken bones were healing?"

"Heh, I thought it was as good an opportunity as any. This also serves as an official visit for me; this is an educational facility with the most cutting-edge technology, after all."

Okay, now I get it. Ms. Nakada was pretty obsequious around Shizuku, so I figured she was a big shot. Seeing as she was so rough on the Akabanes, I also thought she might have known their family in real life.

Thinking back on it, Shizuku especially favored Akira from the start. Like when she gave us that valuable Super Special Warp Stone, although I just assumed she didn't know the true value of it.

"You should've said something! I would've—"

"If I had, you would've hidden your true self. I know you're too cunning for that."

“Ugh...”

Fear was written all over her face. Was she actually going to get pulled out of school right now? I couldn't let that happen!

“Please forgive meeeee!”

I stood in front of Shizuku-Grandpa and bowed as low as I could go.

“Akira didn't want to do it, anyway. I made her do it! I knew sword dancers only had gear like that, but I was only thinking about their abilities! I'm so, so sorry!”



“Hm? Do you feel nothing when you see her in such attire? Is my granddaughter unattractive, perhaps?”

“No! She’s perfectly fine in that regard!”

“Then I can’t imagine you were *only* thinking about their abilities.”

“Err, I... Haha...”

“Come *on*, Ren!” Akira shouted in a huff. “You have to refute that!”

“Well, it matters not. Regardless of what you proposed, it was her decision to accept. Again, a problem of self-awareness.”

Shizuku glanced at Akira.

“Aww, I’m sorry...”

Akabane then slipped right between them.

“I don’t care *what* your family problems are, but your methods disgust me. You conceal your identity and try desperately to find a problem that isn’t there. You lack delicacy.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stay out of it? This has nothing to do with you.”

Shizuku tried to do away with Akabane, but the other, weirder Akabane brought his face in close.

“But wait, I say, Iwao Aoyagi!”

“Stop saying my name, you! And put some clothes on!”

“Hmph. There is one thing that I must ask of you!”

“What? Make it quick; I don’t want people thinking we’re friends.”

“Then perhaps I shall do this, so that we can take our time!”

Ryuutarou used Vanishing Whirl to hide himself.

I’d seen a lot of angry “Show yourself, intruder!” in anime and whatnot, but this was the first time I had seen someone try more of a “Hide yourself, intruder!” approach. I probably wouldn’t ever see it again. That said, it was much easier to talk when Ryuutarou disappeared. Whenever I saw him, my instincts screamed *Do not approach!* It felt like I couldn’t just... talk to him.

“So? What is it?”

“Perhaps you have come face-to-face with a side of Akira that is difficult to accept. But is that all you’ve witnessed here? Have you not seen anything greater than that?”

“Hm?”

“Indeed, I’ve come to notice something about Akira. In this world, she is able to freely express and enjoy herself. Her smile is bigger than ever. I know very well that these smiles come from the heart, uncaring of appearances or diplomacy. Have you ever seen Akira in such a state?”

Shizuku didn’t respond.

“I certainly hadn’t. I’ve seen her on occasion since we were young, and every time, she was as reserved as a caged bird! Yet in this world, she is free, and she flourishes for it—almost as though she were a different person! She is cheerful and sunny, and she glows with such *human* charm! Have you truly not noticed?”

“I’ll have you know that we’re family. Of course I noticed.”

“Good! Then stop focusing on these trifles and look at what really matters! If she needs more extreme clothing to be herself, then I say she should be free to bare as much as she pleases! Strip and shine! It’s just a game, after all; you don’t have to be mad!”

Eww! You didn’t have to punctuate that by reappearing! That was a waste of a speech that was actually kinda meaningful!

“Grandpa, I love this school. I don’t want to leave! Please don’t make me go!”

Akira’s pleading was met with a sigh from Shizuku.

“This is clearly some sort of misunderstanding. I wasn’t planning to make you leave. I just wanted to grumble about it. This miscreant is right—you obviously enjoy yourself much more here. That is, in part, thanks to this Takashiro boy, isn’t it? I’d best thank him, then.” Shizuku turned to me and bowed her head. “Takashiro, thank you for all you’ve done for Akira.”

“Oh, it’s no prob. Having her around is more fun for me too.”

“Now, I complained about her attire, but I like to think that I’m not as stubborn as her father. You are going to retrieve something that will render our worries unnecessary, right? If so, I’m willing to turn the other cheek for now.”

“Oh, Grandpa, thank you!”

Akira flung her arms around Shizuku.

“Hahahaha! How many years has it been since you hugged me?”

Watching them, Ryuutarou laughed nihilistically.

“It seems your fears were groundless, after all.”

“No, my dear brother. I believe your words may have changed his mind, after all. Thank you for your help.”

“Oh, please. Friendship is beautiful, is it not? I myself am touched by this truly lovely sight. But now, I shall take my leave.”

With that, Ryuutarou disappeared once more.

Well, whatever. I’m not gonna ask him to come back.

“So, Grandpa! Since we beat the boss, do you wanna see the rest of the dungeon? I wanna go even farther!”

“Sure, I don’t mind. It feels better to have these secrets all out in the open, so I’ll gladly enjoy myself.”

“Good idea, Akira. Let’s get going!”

Now that all of our problems had been solved, we were free to enjoy our dungeon raids.

Yano grinned. "I'm in. Let's go!"

"Absolutely," Maeda said with a nod. "I'd love to come too."

Akabane chimed in with, "Agreed!"

Off we went for another run. We were out of Special Warp Stones, but if we were lucky in this little look-see, we might be able to pick one up along the way. Thus, we warped to B81F!

"Here we go, ladies and gentleman!"

Upon arriving at the save point, we saw the familiar stone walls of Aswarth's. The area was like a plaza, with a path leading deeper in.

"Hmm. We're not getting the usual ping."

Aren't we supposed to get a clear condition?

"Well, there's a path. How about we follow it for now?" Akira suggested.

Thus, we proceeded along the path. Eventually, we ran into a wall with the anime girl lion head—but larger—embedded in it.

A dead end? I didn't notice any forks.

"Great job making it here, chosen ones!"

Huh? That was the same anime-girl voice!

"This door leads to even more trials ahead. Only those who are skilled in the scholarly and military arts can get in! Seeing as you've come this far, I guess you've nailed that last one!"

I smirked. *Yeah, you know it!*

"So the scholarly arts, then! Bring me proof that you've all finished your summer vacation homework!"

"Whaaat?!" all of us, except for Maeda and Shizuku, screamed.

"Finish your homework, give it to the school, and bring the QR code they give you! Then you can keep goin'."

Homework?! What kind of loser does homework?! Doesn't everyone just speedrun it at the last minute?!

"Looks like you don't all have it. Then get the heck outta here! Byeee!"

In a flash, our merry little band was forcefully expelled from the dungeon. We slackers couldn't help but cry out in frustration.

"Gaaaaah!"

What a cowardly trick! Who would bring homework into a real-deal race?!

Shizuku sighed. "Goodness me. You didn't do it either, Akira?"

"You all had better do your homework soon," Maeda chided us.

"Dammit!" I cursed. "Stupid homework!"

"We've gotta hurry, guys!" Akira shouted.

Yano was on the verge of tears. "Waaah! I don't wanna! This game sucks! Grrr!"

"This is when the real suffering begins!" said Akabane.

I did my best to get motivated. "Now's not the time to be standing around! We've gotta go home and do our homework on the double!"

“Yeah!” Akira agreed.

Just then, something dawned on all of us.

“Oh nooo! Someone else was just in the same situation as we are!”

They were mad too! They had something to do too!

“It was Yukino and Homura!”

Did they take down the Hadean Rose just before we did?! Wow! You go, twins! I thought they might have it harder thanks to the level difference, but we were the ones who ended up behind!

“Noooo! Girls, hurry!”

We made our way back to the floating cottage as fast as we could.



The next day, we were in the cottage fighting a desperate battle... against our summer homework.

“Gaaaaah! Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Who knew that the ultimate condition to continuing Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins would be conquering our homework?!

This was entirely unexpected. I had to say, they’d gotten me good. The whole purpose of summer vacation was to game all day and night. This wasn’t the time to be doing homework! That was supposed to be done a day or two before the opening ceremony and the first day of classes. You didn’t start it until *after* the semester had technically begun.

You would look at what order your classes started in and prioritize their homework in that same order. Sometimes, you had to make tactical sacrifices if it seemed impossible; you’d have to have the resolve to flunk the class. It wasn’t something to be done in the middle of summer! Maybe they had done it knowing all too well how us gamer life-forms worked.

Are all summer vacation events like this? But no, wait. Even Yukino and Homura got caught in this devious trap, and they’re third-year students.

“Ugh, I’m beat. I just can’t bring myself to do this.”

Yano yawned and stretched out on the couch.

“Hey, you! Stop loafing around! Focus! Now!”

I called Yano out, but her reaction was less than reassuring.

“Pssh. I can’t focus when *somebody* won’t stop yelling at me!”

“Mmgh. My sheer determination just manifested as a yell, okay?”

“Shut up, or I can’t concentrate!”

“Oh? So if I’m quiet, you can? Then I’ll keep quiet; just keep it up!”

“Ugh.”

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone, Takashiro,” Maeda admonished me.

She had diligently finished her homework long ago, so she was playing the role of supervisor in our cottage study session.

“Huh?”

“You got this one wrong. And this one, and this one, and... ouch. That one too.”

“Wha...?”

“You’re rushing too much. I understand you want this done, but you have to think it through.”

“Gnngh!”

“That’s what happens when you rush, dummy. Gotta take it slooow.”

“Actually, Yuuna, you should probably go faster.”

“Urk! But look, Akki’s not doing anything! She’s just sitting there!”

“Huh? Me? O-Oh, yeah.”

“Wow. You too, Akira? We’ve gotta hurry, or they’ll get ahead of us.”

“Yeah, I know. But Grandpa let me go after seeing me, y’know? I think I might actually be fine as I am now. It’s such a relief that I think I’m losing my motivation. All this time, I was just so afraid of my family.”

“It ain’t a parent’s job to take away their kids’ fun. What he did was normal!”

“She’s right. You’re always so bubbly and friendly, Akira. I can’t imagine someone wanting to take that away from you.”

“Yeah. It was a big surprise, but I’m actually kinda glad Grandpa came to check up on me.”



“That doesn’t mean you can slack on this race! We’ve made it this far, so we might as well win! I’ll shut up now. Focus, girls!”

“Yeah, true! Let’s do it!”

“Bleeeh.”

For a while, the only noise was the sound of our pencils against paper.

Maeda, who had been looking at the Dealer’s Desk, suddenly piped up, “Huh?! What is *this*?!”

I glanced up from my work. “Hm?”

Yano did the same. “Sup, Kotomi?”

“What is it?” Akira asked.

“Everyone, look!”

She turned the screen toward us. There was a video on it with familiar scenery: Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins. So this was a gameplay video, was it?

“Hellooooo, boys and girls!”

The Death Chariot appeared on-screen, accompanied by a cheerful girl’s voice. It waved its hands at the camera, something that the real Death Chariot would never do.

“Is that Death Chariot gear?!” I blurted. “And hey, I know that voice. That’s Emily!”

The person in the gear took the mask off, revealing Emily’s face beneath it.

Smiling sweetly, Emily said, “We’re just about to go and fight the Hadean Rose everyone’s been talking about at Aswarth’s Undersea Ruins!”

“Ooh. Did Emily’s party win too?!”

“They must’ve!” Yano insisted. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t have put the video up.”

“But why has she donned that equipment, I wonder?” Maeda said thoughtfully. “Nothing else looks like it, correct?”

I shrugged. “Dunno. I think it’s the real-deal Death Chariot gear.”

So did her party collect all the pieces, then? I guess she was there back when Ryuutarou received the robe. Of course she’d come to the same conclusion as me. I wouldn’t expect anything less from her!

“The keys to this raid will be this equipment and this magic right here: Elemental Circle!”

Having put the Death Chariot gear back on, Emily cast Elemental Circle. Due to its hidden effect, it naturally guaranteed a dark circle. The purplish black circle appeared on the floor.

Wow, she’s using symbolologist techniques!

“Huh?” Akira blinked. “Did Emily change classes to symbolologist?!”

Yano seemed floored. “Is she tryna do the same thing you did, Takashiro?!”

“It’s the one-shot, ignore-the-mechanics strategy!” Maeda pointed out.

“It *did* let us win with just a minute left,” Akira said. “That’s about as easy as it gets.”

“She stole your strat, Takashiro! Doesn’t that tick you off?”

“Heheheh. She has a good eye! This means my strat caught the eye of a pro, doesn’t it? That sounds great to me!”

I *had* told Emily all about my basic symbologist strategy, complete with skills and talents. If she thought it would help her, then I was happy to let her use it all she wanted. As long as people saw the symbologist in a new light thanks to my experimentation and planning, that was good enough for me.

In fact, I was overjoyed that people would imitate me. That meant that people saw worth in what I was doing. I didn’t necessarily need to be the one who initiated its spread. Emily had adopted my method and streamed it, so she had my full support.

“So are Emily and her pals gonna win?” Yano asked me.

“Yeah. Like you said, they wouldn’t have uploaded this video otherwise.”

“And does that mean everyone’s gonna copy you?”

“If so, I couldn’t be happier. I bet symbologists wearing Death Chariot gear are gonna line the streets.”

“Yeah, but it just doesn’t look good. Like, it makes everything else around it look ugly.”

“That’s cool! Function over form!”

“But we still don’t have the Rainbow Guard yet.”

“Oh yeah. Let’s hurry and finish this homework!”

“What happens if the people who copy you turn in their homework first? They’re gonna overtake us.”

“That’d be tough! But the video’s up, so we can’t stop them. As soon as we finish watching, let’s speed things up.”

Maeda gave us a stern look. “You’d better. In the end, it’s a contest to see who’s finished their summer homework.”

“Kinda wholesome, if you think about it,” Akira commented.

While we talked, Emily explained their strategy—which meant explaining the basic construction of the drama cannon and how the Elemental Circle worked. Unsurprisingly, the key to all this was the dark circle. The max-HP boost it gave doubled firepower along with durability.

Elemental Circle was still relatively new. The fact that it hid such an explosive boost to symbologist firepower was its greatest draw. Plus, all it took to get the dark circle every time was the full set of

Death Chariot gear. With this, it was possible to go specifically for dark circles and use the resulting HP increase to boost firepower. Relying on pure chance just wasn't a real strategy. Nobody would have been willing to adopt it then.

"Ren, what do you think she's gonna do? That won't be enough, will it?" Akira asked.

She wasn't wrong; according to Emily's explanation so far, she was only at the step where I had initially given up and sent the gang to fight for me. Specifically, that was the step where she could only break through 20,000 of the Hadean Rose's 30,000 HP. I had Tie Shan Kao (temp) thanks to Master Mommaru teaching me it as a limited quest reward. That was what had allowed me to break the 30,000 damage barrier.

"Good point. But since they put the video up, they must have found a way."

At that moment, Emily wrapped up her explanation.

"Well, it's time for the main event! Here we go! Let's do this thing, Lucas!"

"Yeah! This will be over in the blink of an eye, so don't miss it!" came Lucas's voice.

When he appeared on-screen, he was *also* wearing the Death Chariot gear.

"Oh, I get it!"

20,000 times 2 is 40,000. In other words, insta-death for the flower!

To change classes while retaining your level, you needed the item Wings of Reincarnation. In order to get that, you needed to trade in 800 Merit Points, which were supplied based on test scores in school. That meant you needed to score 800 points on the test.

Our MEP was close to zero, so we never had the option to change someone's class in the first place. *Of course* having two symbologists in full Death Chariot gear with Caneswords bearing Peregrine Stones would make any job easy. Without Tie Shan Kao (temp), I would have had to find a way to clone myself.

"Aah, they had two people do it!" Akira exclaimed.

"Whoa, hold up. If a double-symbologist strat for drama cannoning the Hadean Rose to death actually becomes popular, the symbologist population is gonna go through the roof! Yeah, keep it up!"

It was good for this class to see the light of day, as I was the only person who played it. Now that the Elemental Circle had been exposed as god-tier magic, the min-maxed drama cannon and its insane instant damage were going to grab the attention of the world!

Without Elemental Circle, 10,000 damage was the drama cannon's limit. After that, it would take three or four people to kill the Hadean

Rose instantly; if they were all symbologists, defeating the monster would be extremely difficult. Elemental Circle had made it so Emily and Lucas could invest in the drama cannon and take the monster down together. Truly, my experimentation had come to fruition!

Akira laughed. "Hahaha. That's definitely the reaction I'd expect from you. I guess it's fine as long as you're happy, right?"

"Yep! You've got that right!"

In the video, Emily and Lucas arrived at B80F and the battle began. They dove in as a pair, and their ultimates tore through the Hadean Rose! With that, the giant flower fell. It looked like they had taken it down with ease, but the journey leading up to this moment must have been extremely precious. What we saw on-screen was the culmination of their efforts.

That's fine with me, though. As long as people think they can imitate this, it could become the next big thing!

After that glowing success, Emily turned back to the camera. "All right! As you can see, we've won! By the way, this symbologist build was almost entirely devised by Ren Takashiro, a student from class 1-E at the main campus. Thanks a lot, Ren!"

"No problem!" I replied.

"Oh, phew! I'm really glad you said that. Honestly, I wanted to let you know ahead of time, but I just couldn't get the call through yesterday."

"Hm? Oh, sorry. I was a little busy."

At that moment, it dawned on me that she'd spoken back to me. When I looked up from the screen, I saw the real Emily right in front of me!

"Whoa, when'd you get here?!"

"Just now! I had to at least say something after I carbon-copied your strat."

"Aah, it's all good. This might be symbologist's chance to go big-time."

"Two symbologists, though! You guys really took the plunge," Akira cut in.

"We were able to use Wings of Reincarnation! Lucas and the others were against it, but when I saw Ren, I knew we could do it! It's more fun to watch unpopular classes win, anyway."

Exactly! Emily has good taste.

"Okay. Since you filched our strat, I want you to give us some info," Yano said. "Do you get the Rainbow Guard once you pass the stupid homework wall?"

"Huh? You guys won too? I knew you'd be quick!"

I gave a nod. "Yep. It was only just yesterday, though."

"So we did it at the same time. Neat!"

“As I was saying, we’re stuck at the homework wall. What comes after?” Yano pressed.

“Um, about that. Y’see...”

“What?”

“I dunno either!”

“Huh?! Why the heck not?”

“We’re stuck doing homework too!”

“No waaay!”

“That’s why I gotta go, like, right now! They’re pretty sneaky, using real-life homework as a clear condition in-game!”

“Then why’d you upload the video? What happens if someone finishes their homework and overtakes you?!”

“Meh, it doesn’t really matter to me. Our sponsor told us to make the video, anyway. So hey, good luck with your homework! Later!”

With a wave, Emily hurried off to do her own work.

“Yeah! You too, Emily!” I called after her.

After seeing her off, it was clear what we had to do.

“So it all comes down to this, eh?” I muttered. “All riiight! Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

Yano let out a groan. “Shut *up*, gosh! I can’t concentrate!”

“So we’re back to where we started,” Maeda said.

Suddenly, Akira seemed struck with inspiration. “Oh yeah! How about we meet up tomorrow and tackle this from another angle? I’m sure we won’t finish by the end of the day, anyway.”

“Huh, you mean like doing it in the guild house? Or the school library, or what?” Yano asked.

“Nope. I was thinking maybe... my real house?”

“Ooh!” I shouted. “Yeah, you said something about having a nice feast for us, right?”

“Yeah, yeah! I know I said I’d do it when we were done with the event, but we *did* beat the Hadean Rose, so I think now’s a good time!”

“Are you inviting us over, Akki?! I bet your house is humongous! I can’t wait! But wasn’t it kinda far away?”

“Should be in Yokohama, right? Might take us a while to get there.”

I lived in Tokyo, while Maeda and Yano lived in Chiba. It wasn’t that we *couldn’t* go to Yokohama, but...

“Considering the commute... I dunno, Akira. We kinda need to hurry.”

“It’s okay,” she assured me. “I’ll bring a big limo to pick you all up, so we can do our homework in the car!”

“A big limo?!”

Whoa, what?! Nobody’s ever offered me that before!

I had also never heard of someone doing such a thing just to hang out with friends. This made me realize that Akira truly was a real-deal rich girl.

“Yep. We’ll stop by each one of your houses!”

“Whoa, this is already too big for me. We’re not even there yet, and she’s throwin’ out words like ‘limo!’”

“But, erm, are you sure you should do that much for us?” Maeda asked meekly.

“It’s fine! My grandpa said it’s okay to have friends over, and we need to finish up soon, right? We can just do it on the way!”

“Well, if you mean it, then it sounds great to me!” I said.

“Woooo! Get hype!”

“Yes, we’d be glad to take you up on that.”

“Yay! Oh, and she’s not here today, but Nozomi’s probably gonna come too.”

“Nice. Sounds great!”

Thus, it was decided that tomorrow’s homework would be done not in the cottage, but at Akira’s house!

Chapter 8: Our New Titles

Late that night, I logged in to Unlimited World. I had made preparations to go to everyone's houses and pick them all up tomorrow, talked to our personal chef about making my friends' favorite foods, and called Nozomi to invite her because she hadn't been online earlier.

My family and Nozomi's family didn't get along well, but Grandpa was okay with her coming. His approval hadn't come without a little grimace, but he hadn't said no! Considering all that had happened so far, I thought it was great.

Most important of all, I was gonna get to meet Ren *in person* tomorrow! We had known each other through games for several years now, but this was the first time I'd meet him in real life. I had always wanted to meet him. Tomorrow, that would become a reality. The thought alone filled my heart with joy, but something was also causing it to ache and throb.

In order to make sure absolutely everything would go according to plan, I stayed in the bath longer than usual and laid out some brand-new makeup tools. I would be in the limo to pick everyone up, so I had to greet Ren with the biggest, prettiest smile I could! Hopefully, he would think I was cuter in real life than in-game.

While I was thinking frivolous thoughts and running simulations of the next day in my head, Nozomi invited me for a virtual chat. Last time we'd talked this late at night, our base of operations had been the floating cottage. This time, we weren't in Summertide at all; we were in the normal world, on the floating island of Telluna.

Today's secret meeting wasn't at the guild house either; it was at the coastal park just outside of the guild shop district. As the name implied, it was a park situated at the edge of the airship port. The place was beautiful. Beyond the railing was a starry sky that stretched out like a vast, splendid painting.

Standing side by side, Nozomi and I took in this romantic spectacle.

"Well done, inviting Takashiro to your home. Allow me to be the first to congratulate you."

I let out a sigh. "Thanks. I'm glad Grandpa was okay with me bringing people."

"My brother has said this too, but you do look much happier when

you're with Takashiro. Anyone who knows that would have a hard time pulling you out of school, regardless of the so-called issues involved. I can also see why he would be hospitable enough to invite Takashiro, seeing as he has such a positive influence on you."

"It really is all thanks to him."

"I would have to say so. You're less radiant in his absence."

"Ahaha... Maybe you're right."

"That means you *need* Takashiro, doesn't it? Do you understand now?"

"Well, yeah. I do."

"Then that means you have important work to do tomorrow!"

"I know. I'm gonna make myself so pretty, he—"

Nozomi jabbed a finger toward me. "You're lax! Far too lax!"

"Huh?! Then what else am I supposed to do?!"

"You have to tell him how you feel! You must move with haste, because you need Takashiro! It'll be too late if he ends up with someone else! Even your grandfather accepts him, so what other problems could there possibly be?"

"B-B-But I can't just... I wasn't planning to do that tomorrow, so my heart isn't exactly ready for it."

"Then when will it be ready?"

"I-I... I dunno."

"That's not surprising—you're just making excuses. Readiness isn't something that just happens on its own—you *make* it happen! I'm here to help you, so do some preliminary practice! Otherwise, you'll balk when the time comes."

"Do some *what*?"

"You heard me! Look up into the sky and tell the world how you feel about Takashiro! He won't come here, so you're free to yell as loud as you can! I don't see anyone else around, anyway."

She was right; we were the only ones in the park. I could scream as loud as possible into the night sky, but nobody else would hear it.

"So that's why you had me come here!"

"Yes. If we had met at the cottage or guild house, we would've risked getting caught."

"B-But still..."

"You need practice putting your feelings into words! This is necessary for when the time comes! Now go on and say it. Once you do, you'll understand your own feelings better. And in my opinion, it's actually quite satisfying."

"U-Umm... R-Ren, thanks for... all the good times. I-I love you."

Whoa, I said it! What would he do if he heard this? Would he be happy? Imagine if he said he loved me back! Aah, that would be perfect!

"Well? How does it feel to say your feelings aloud?"

“It’s not that bad, actually. Kinda exciting, and... electrifying.”

“Then let us continue! Say it louder and clearer! And make sure to think of some responses for the real event!”

Urged on by Nozomi, I practiced my confession for a while. I got bolder over time, eventually succeeding in yelling “I love you!” out loud.

This really does feel nice, even if it is embarrassing.

After a while, we took a break.

“How should I actually say it, though?”

“From what I have seen, I believe a passionate confession regarding how you came to love him would be best. Would you like to try it?”

“Huh... What would that look like?”



After everyone who’d been at the floating cottage logged out, I continued my homework in real life. We were planning to gather at Akira’s house to finish it all tomorrow, so I had to get through as much as I could before then!

“Haaaah! Faster, faster!”

While I rushed to make progress, the door to my room opened. My mother stood in the doorway, looking rather disturbed.

“Ren, I can’t believe you can yell like that while you’re doing your homework. It’s kind of impressive.”

“Oh, it just comes naturally to me. What’s up?”

“It’s time for dinner! Come on down.”

“Awesome! I’ll take a quick break, then.”

I stopped working to chow down for a bit. If you’re interested, tonight’s dinner was fried shrimp, and it was fantastic.

Oh, right! I have to tell her about tomorrow.

“By the way, Mom, I’m going out tomorrow. I’ll be at a friend’s house all day.”

“My, really? Whose is it?”

“Akira’s!”

“Wow! That’s the girl you’re always playing games with, right? I saw her back during your little event; she was adorable! Well, all of your friends were cute, though.”

“Hm? Yeah, I guess so.”

Aside from me, our guild was all girls. Considering the usual MMO gamer demographics, it was so unlikely that I’d have to call it a miracle.

“Are you going on a daaate? Could it be? Is my little baby going out with a girl?!”

I figured all the moms latched on to subjects like this, and mine

was no exception. Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“No, no! We’re all just doing homework there. Besides, it’s my first time meeting her in real life.”

“Really? Well, that’s still nice. You’ve got to start talking to real girls anyway.”

“I talk to her in-game, though.”

“I’m sure there are things about her you can only learn in person.”

“You think?”

Hmm, I dunno.

I was excited, but her avatar’s appearance was based on an actual scan of her body; she would look just about the same in real life.

Oh, but Akira’s hair color is pink in-game, so that’ll definitely be different. I’d be terrified if she had pink hair for real.

The game also mimicked human softness and warmth; it was almost disturbingly realistic. It didn’t retain human smell, though, so she’d probably smell like something. Kataoka had once said my party was full of Hime-chans and that they smelled nice or whatever, but he was definitely imagining it!

Real-life Akira probably smells incredible. I can’t wait for that!

“I’ll be so relieved if you can get yourself a girlfriend. It’s nice how all the girls in that school are sure to have similar hobbies to yours too.”

“Okay, but seriously...”

“Come on, now. Akira’s cute, and she likes you a lot. I think you’d be great together, don’t you?”

“She has her own problems to deal with, though.”

“Oh? What about you, though?”

“Well...”

I agreed that she was cute, and I thought we got along well too. We thought of each other as best friends, after all! Sometimes, I even thought about gaming with her forever.

“Aah, forget it. I’ve gotta hurry up and get back to my homework!”

“What a good boy. Homework is important! Do you want seconds?”

“Yes, please!”

“Got it! Wait right there.”

After I finished, I returned to my room to find that I had a message on the school’s network. It was from Shizuku, the young woman who had actually turned out to be Akira’s grandfather.

What’s her real Grandpa like? Is he mega strict?

Leaving that aside, I checked the message.

“Hm? He needs me urgently, so I have to log in right now, huh? He wants to meet at the park near Telluna’s guild shop district, huh?”

Can Shizuku access places other than Summertide? I didn't think that was possible. Eh, maybe that's just part of her power as a VIP. Based on how Ms. Nakada treated her, I wouldn't be surprised.

Anyway, I was being summoned. Might as well check it out!



When I logged in and went to the meeting point, Shizuku was waiting at the park entrance with her arms crossed. Though she looked like a pretty lady on the outside, she was still Akira's grandfather. It wasn't rare for people to play as a different gender in games, but this was my first time seeing a GIRL—that is, a Guy in Real Life—as old as Akira's grandpa! Apparently, her appearance was meant to replicate Akira's grandmother when she was young.

Come to think of it, she does kind of resemble Akira a little.

"Hey, Shizuku. What brings you here this fine evening?"

"Hello, Takashiro. I apologize for calling you here."

"No problem! What's up?"

"Well, there's something I have to show you. Come this way."

"Sure!"

"Take this and conceal yourself."

Shizuku handed me an item called Prism Sand. Its effect was the same as a sword dancer's Vanishing Whirl; it turned the user invisible. Mainly, it was used to avoid monsters or work covertly.

What's the point of using this in town? I'm nowhere near as embarrassing as Ryuutarou.

"Huh? Why?"

"We don't want to be seen. It's nothing dangerous, though. Follow me and stay quiet."

"Hm? Sure, I guess."

With that, we concealed ourselves and proceeded into the park. Eventually, we arrived at the area farthest from town, where only a few steps past the fence would take you into the starry night.

There, I saw her.

"Oh? Akira's here."

She was leaning against the fence and screaming something into the night sky. Akabane was next to her too. They really had hit it off.

"Heeey, Akira!"

"Shhh! Quiet! Get closer, and don't speak a word."

"Huh?"

We crept closer, and then I could hear what Akira was shouting into the abyss.

"Reeeen! I love yooooou! I want you in my life, Reeeeen!"

What the...?! Uhh, am I supposed to be here?! Did Shizuku bring me here just so I could hear this?! Is this okay?!

“Hey, Shizuku!” I hissed. “I seriously shouldn’t be hearing this, right?! We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Don’t be silly. If we did, there would’ve been no point in me bringing you.”

Before Shizuku finished talking, she uncloaked herself and started clapping. Noticing her, Akira jumped and turned around.

“Well said, Akira. I like your enthusiasm.”

“Grandpa?! Wh-Wh-Why are you here?! N-Nozomi, what’s going on?!”

“Don’t be too surprised yet, my dear. Shizuku, did everything go as planned?”

“Yes. Come, Takashiro. You can show yourself. You heard it too, didn’t you?”



“Um, yeah, I did.”

At this point, I pretty much had to show myself, so I obeyed. When I appeared, Akira let out a scream.

“EEEEEEK! REN?!” She started trembling with fear. “Aaaahhh!”

Seemingly immune, Akabane flashed a smile at me. “Well, Takashiro, the rest is up to you. Akira, consider this a present from me to you. A token of our friendship, so to speak. Going at your own pace would be far too slow, so I decided to move things along for you.”

Shizuku added, “Takashiro, you plan to come to our house tomorrow, right?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. I mean, sir.”

“It’s thanks to you that Akira is so lively and happy at this school. I assure you, it’s not often that you can meet a person who has such an effect on you. As such, tomorrow, I want to entertain you as I would any potential husband of hers. I married into the Aoyagi family too, you know. You’ll get used to it before long.”

“Oh.”

“Grandpa, what the heeeeck?! You’re scaring Ren, you dummy!”

“Aww, look. I’ve gone and angered my granddaughter. Well, I’ll leave it to you now. We’ll await you with open arms tomorrow. Nozomi, let us be off.”

“Yes, let’s.”

As they logged out, Shizuku and Akabane disappeared. All that remained was me, standing there stunned, and a crying Akira. Silence fell over us, getting only heavier and heavier while we struggled over what to say.

What should I say at a time like this? I have no experience, so I’ve got no idea!

“Say something already! You, um, already heard what I would say,” Akira said, averting her eyes.

At that moment, I knew I had to respond. I leaned over the railing and took a deep breath.

Then, I screamed out into the sky, “I love you, toooo! Do you wanna go out, or whaaat?!”

For some reason, it sent a shiver down my spine.

This is more embarrassing than I thought! I wanted to be fair since Akira did it, but dang, that was hard! I can’t believe she had the nerve to do that on her own.

I turned back to face her. “So, how about it?”

“Just so you know, this isn’t like making two characters in a video game love each other! This is real-life stuff, okay?! I mean, we haven’t even met yet. Are you sure?”

“I know, I know. I don’t have *that* much of a disconnect with

reality, trust me.”

“You basically live inside the game world, though.”

“Well, let’s put this in gaming terms, then. This is optimal! I wanted to game with you forever, so dating and maybe getting married would be optimal anyway!”

Akira loved my answer so much that she burst out laughing. “Ahahaha! Yep, that’s so you. I agree!” Tears sprang to her eyes as she continued to chuckle.

“You laugh, but I’m being serious. I’ve always loved playing games with you, even before we came to this school. You don’t know how shocked I was to see you were actually a cute girl.”

“Yep. You never doubted that I was a boy, right?”

“Never! It surprised me, but we kept on gaming like usual, and I found myself having even more fun. This might be selfish, but I can’t even calm down unless you’re smiling by my side. Just sucks to be without you, y’know? That’s why I was so serious about getting that Rainbow Guard for you.”

“Aww, Ren. I know how hard you tried.”

“If nothing else, I can at least tell you’re special to me. I’m just a simple gamer, so I’m satisfied with just playing together every day. But if we were to put a label on us, like boyfriend and girlfriend or whatever, then hey, why not? Anything’s fine as long as I’m with you.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way. I’m happy to hear how much you’ve been thinking about me.”

It felt as though the reason for her tears had changed. Akira gazed at me, radiating both joy and sorrow. She was ridiculously adorable.

“Yep. So I figured I’d wrap it all up in a few neat little words and follow your lead by screaming it to the world!”

“It wasn’t my idea, it was Nozomi’s! Jeez, you didn’t have to copy me!”

“Whatever, it’s all water under the bridge. Though the sight is eternally saved in my brain now.”

“Aaaaargh!” Akira put her hands on her head, but then she giggled. “Pfft... Heehee.”

“Uh, what’s up?”

“Since you embarrassed me so bad, maybe I oughta get what I want!”

Akira looked at me with a glint in her eye.

“Um... What’s the plan here?” I asked awkwardly.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck. Then, she stretched as tall as she could and leaned in. Her beautiful, flawless face drew closer.

“Hey, Akira! Hold on, what are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell from the buildup? We’re gonna kiss!”

“But we’re outside. Besides, this is too sudden!”

“Like Nozomi said, I think with my heart and not my head. When I’m with you, I always want to do this. It’s not sudden; I’ve just been waiting for my chance! We’re already totally embarrassed, so we might as well.”

“S-Still, I...”

“What are we now? I seem to recall us having new titles.”

“Um, yeah. Boyfriend and girlfriend, right?”

“Then what’s the problem? C’mon, give up and close those eyes!”

“O-Okay.”

I gave up. I gave up so hard! I was surprised by how sudden it all was, but Akira was right; there really wasn’t a problem here other than the location. I figured I might as well enjoy the situation as much as I could. I closed my eyes and leaned in, to the point that I could feel her breath on my face.

Bzzzzt! Craaash!

There was a warning noise, accompanied by the sensation of something hitting me.

“Urk!”

I opened my eyes and saw a warning message in my system log!

This is a violation of the moral code! Lewd and lascivious acts are forbidden in this space!

Gaaah, seriously?! Well, okay, this is still a school! Does the game forcibly cancel these kinds of actions?

Fortunately, it didn’t do much but shake me a little. However, Akira—the one who had initiated the kiss—took quite the impact and was blown away. She flew high into the air, sailing over the park’s fence. Then, she fell straight down!

“Aaaaahhh!”

Her scream trailed off into the distance.

“Oh crap! She fell!”

Akira is exhausted...

Whoa, and she died!

So, to summarize... *A girl agreed to go steady with me for the first time in my life, and just when she tried to kiss me, she got blown away and died.*

It was incomprehensible, but at the same time, it was the truth!

“Umm... I guess I’ll go home. She should revive back at the cottage.”

Just as I tried to head home, I heard a *ping!*

Oh, hey, a message from Akira.

It read: “*Don’t look for me.*”

Yeah, fair. That was pretty embarrassing.

At that point, I decided to log out.

The next day, while I was at home, I heard the sound of the doorbell.

Ding-dong.

I went up to the door to answer.

“Um, good morning, Ren. Sorry about yesterday.”

There stood my first-ever real-life girlfriend, Akira, with incredible shame on her face!

Epilogue: Class Changes!

Once we wrapped up our summer homework, we made our way back to the door. Much to our chagrin, all of the Rainbow Guards had been snatched up by other teams. They hadn't left behind a single one!

Put simply, the Yukino-Homura team and Emily's party had shot ahead of us while we were stuck doing homework. You'll have to forgive us for failing to get it. Since then, we all decided to fix our poor habits and do homework *first* when we went on long breaks. Obviously, our grades improved.

All the parties who had surpassed us had used Emily's strategy. Ever since then, the symbolologist population was on the rise. Research on Elemental Circle progressed. After some time, other pieces of gear were found—mostly by yours truly—to have similar effects to the Death Chariot gear, except for other elements like light. Eventually, symbolologist became widely accepted as a peerless one-shot drama-cannon class.

The fact that Elemental Circle gave us some soloing capability was big too. The class's instant firepower was able to make up for its costliness and weakness in solo farming. Though you had to throw away your money to use it, its instant firepower was the best out there. Crowds of symbolologists terrified the mightiest of bosses, and it wouldn't be long before it was mentioned in the game's strategy guide.

As for me and Akira, we had fallen right into Akabane and Shizuku's trap and ended up together. As usual, we got along swimmingly. People around us would say that we didn't seem very different from before, but none of them knew that if you went too far with your sweetheart, you'd get knocked out due to a moral code violation.

Even after the day Akira had gotten launched off of me and died, she didn't stop trying. Besides that, I visited her house from time to time.

Eventually, summer vacation was over. Fall came and went, as did our winter and spring breaks. Then came the day that we would become second-year students!

From the window of our guild house, I watched players as they traveled through the district.

“Ooh. I see lots of symbologists among the new students!”

It made me nostalgic for its reputation as King of the Bummers!

“What else would you expect after that strategy vid last summer? You never let up after that either. Take a look at this year’s strategy guide!”

Akira showed me this year’s Unlimited World Guidebook. I took a look, wondering how they’d rated symbologist.

“By default, it’s a back-line class with poor supporting and combat abilities. But with talents such as Knifer and Final Strike, it can become a high-powered burst damage dealer. Your expenses will increase alongside your level. Its solo-farming capabilities are incredibly inconvenient, but ignore all that. Don’t you wanna see the infamous one-shot drama cannon?!”

Oh, what lovely commentary! But maybe that’s thanks to me telling Kataoka to write it that way.

All these people had been attracted to the prospect and decided to try it out. As for me, I was overjoyed to see the results of my experimentation and practice!

“Nice! These writers get it! Now nobody will ever call symbologist the King of the Bummers again!”

“Yep! They gave it a B rating. What a jump, huh?”

“Well, it’s *completely* different from the back-line support they had in mind,” Yano commented.

“That freedom is part of what makes this game great,” Maeda said. “Fun, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess. *Takashiro*’s having plenty of fun, at least.”

“Y’know, Ren. If people keep on choosing symbologist, you’ll get to strut around as the guy who pioneered it.”

“Who, me? I’d never do that. In fact, I’d rather give up on it entirely.”

“Say what?!” everyone yelled at once.

“I mean, I already did.”

“Whaaa?! I-It’s true! You’re a beast tamer now!”

“Hey, what’s the big idea?! I thought you got what you wanted!”

“Wh-What a decision... Are you sure about this, *Takashiro*?”

“Uh, yeah? If symbologist grew out of being King of the Bummers, then naturally, I should grow out of symbologist. I’m here to redefine crappy classes, awaken them, and kill giants! I repeat: redefine, awaken, kill!”

Symbologist had already grown its wings and left my nest! Now it was pretty much on the “top classes” team!

“Hahaha. You freakin’ weirdo.”

“Those are genuinely the only words that come to mind.”

Maeda and Yano looked exasperated beyond belief. On the other

hand, Akira just grinned from ear to ear.

“Ahahaha! That’s so you, Ren! You’ll never be free of your disease.”

“It’s not like I wanna be! You can grow out of sword dancer too, Akira. The whole ‘appearance’ problem just solved itself!”

“Ooh, I know this one! You’re gonna pretend this is for my good, but you really just wanna use me, right?”

“Wow, look at you spreading bad rumors.”

“But sure, I don’t mind! What do you want me to do?”

“Good! Okay, check this out.”

Thus, I began to announce the redefinition plan for my second year in school!



Afterword

First off, thank you so much for buying my book. You've just read volume 6 of *Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy*! How was it? While I was writing, I did my best to cram in every little thing I wanted. My mentality was basically "It's the last one, so I've gotta include this!" Indeed, this marks the final volume.

With Ren and Akira *finally* becoming official like we've all been waiting for, I believe I've accomplished everything I've set out to do since the first volume. It felt like the ideal place to wrap up the story. This is my first time giving something a proper ending, so I'm as happy as a clam!

Looking back, all of the game elements—skills, magic, talents, and the like—made it into the story. That setup made it almost effortless to think of the rules, strategies, and gimmicks to go along with it. I felt like I was crafting a cheerful little "let's play" sort of experience, and it was plenty of fun.

As a former MMO addict, I love gaming tales and challenge runs. This work is very much a "by me, for people like me" story. I'm grateful for the thousands—or maybe tens of thousands?—of hours I put into this! Imagine the skills I could've picked up in that time! Sorry, I just couldn't help but wonder.

Also, all of you have successfully transformed into six novels' worth of royalties! I just hope it was worth your time! That said, I personally see my six volumes as a major accomplishment. There's a lot that I've learned along the way. It feels kind of like I've leveled up as a novelist. Maybe I've extended my lifetime as one too. Anyway, go me! I'm really in a self-congratulatory mood.

You readers might think of six volumes as a pretty short story altogether, but as the writer, it feels like I've been at it for a long time now! I quiver in awe at the beastly authors who can keep series going for over ten volumes. I'd say the hardest part of that is garnering the popularity to make it worthwhile. After all, what's the point of continuing if you don't have people to read your stuff? I'd really love to reach that level some day, but at this point, I honestly have no idea how to crank out a work that incredible.

It's been a few years since I first started writing light novels, but I'm still figuring things out through trial and error. As I begin my next work, I'll continue to do that. In fact, maybe I'll just trial-and-error my

way through this forever, eternally experimenting. Much like Ren, I'd love to use these methods to find new ways to redefine and awaken myself. Then, I'll kill the giant that is the ultra-hard quest: "Make a Series Over Ten Volumes!" Who knows if I'll have reached my awakening by the next series, but I'll do my best! I'd be blessed if you were to check that out, as well.

Finally, to my lead editor N, my lead artist Hika Akita, and everyone else involved, I thank all of you for your considerable efforts.

Well, see you in another series!

Hayaken

Illustration: Hika Akita

“I’ll do that
too! Come swim
with me, Ren!”

What a
lovely sight.
I was still
feeling a little
sleepy, but this
woke me right
up. Big boobs,
slender hips,
snow-white
skin, plump
softness...

Redefining the **META** at
VRMMO Academy 6



A blonde anime girl with a blue bow in her hair is pointing her right index finger forward. She has a surprised or exasperated expression with wide eyes and an open mouth. The background is yellow with black motion lines.

“Argh! I did so much work to make sure you were all alone too! How could you possibly make zero progress at all?”

Nozomi's enthusiastic advice brings big changes to Akira's love life!

A pink-haired anime girl with blue eyes is looking upwards with a thoughtful expression. She has her hand near her chin. The background is pink with white motion lines.

“Well, um, it's not like there was no progress.”



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Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy: Volume 6
by Hayaken

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